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From the Private Secretary

11 February 1992

*John Hithair*TALKS BETWEEN THE PRIME MINISTER AND NORTHERN IRELAND
POLITICAL LEADERS: 11 FEBRUARY

Thank you for the briefing for the meeting between the Prime Minister and Northern Ireland political leaders which took place this afternoon. The Defence Secretary, the Northern Ireland Secretary and Mr. Mawhinney were present.

The Prime Minister welcomed the opportunity to go over the ground and establish a dialogue. There had been a serious turn of events in terms of violence, the brunt of which was borne by the people of Northern Ireland. There had been a significant short term increase in terrorism. The levels of incidence did not compare with the early 1970s but were still unacceptable, particularly in a climate when talks had been started and people were beginning to work together. The Prime Minister was concerned at the extent of tit-for-tat killings, which were clearly dangerous. It would not be right for the Government in those circumstances to say that no improvements in security could be made. Nor would it be right for anyone else to say that the problem was being neglected. The Prime Minister came to these issues more recently than others round the table. Terrorism thrived on divisions. We must find common ground on security and develop the maximum possible united front. There were differences between the political parties in Northern Ireland and between those parties and the Government, but there should be no differences in our joint determination to defeat terrorism. He hoped we could find common ground on security. It would be better still if common ground could be found going beyond security. We could not necessarily stop terrorism altogether, but we could alter the climate in which it might otherwise flourish. There was a real sense that terrorist actions from whatever source were increasingly unacceptable to everyone in Northern Ireland. We must build on that. We had sent a lot of extra troops into the Province. More members of the RUC were being recruited and trained. The Prime Minister was prepared to go over any propositions those at the meeting had to make. He also wanted to explore what part the constitutional process could play. Public opinion would find it hard to accept that the talks should be stalled pending an election. The existence of constitutional talks offered reassurance. Those talks did put pressure on the terrorists. He knew that all those round the table had tried to find an accommodation and make concessions and that they had concluded that it was not possible to make progress. The agreed basis for the talks was supported by every constitutional political party in Great Britain, Northern Ireland

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and the Republic. It was hard to believe that if the talks re-started they could not continue after the UK general election on the same basis. Everyone who participated was protected by the fact that nothing was agreed unless everything was agreed. There was intense public support for the talks resuming.

The Prime Minister invited Mr. Molyneaux to speak next. Mr. Molyneaux expressed gratitude for the meeting. He had been reflecting on the scope for changes in security and rather feared that Mr. Brooke's Newcastle speech - which had clearly been drafted before Thursday's offer of a meeting - had closed off some of the Unionist options and possible proposals. Perceptions were everything and the perception in Northern Ireland was that the British were getting out. That was the fear of the Loyalist para-militaries and the hope of Republican terrorists. There were two opposing terrorist forces in Northern Ireland which were becoming evenly matched. The Prime Minister had been right to say that the situation was not out of control but the fact was that those two groupings did have a large measure of control. They were deaf to condemnation and closed to intelligence penetration. They were happy to be isolated. He knew that the Prime Minister had said that Britain was not getting out of Northern Ireland but in the minds of hundreds those assurances were nullified by what they actually saw happening. The Northern Ireland people needed the reassurance of deeds. He had nothing against an agreement between the Irish government and the British Government, provided that it was based on a desire to normalise relations between the two nations and was not trying to settle the future of Northern Ireland. The relationship might be unique but it was not normal because of the Irish government's claim to the territory of Northern Ireland. If the two governments could get on well then they should move on to seek the withdrawal of the Irish territorial claim. An agreement between the two governments which embodied the withdrawal of that claim would remove any excuses for Loyalist terrorism.

Mr. Hume said that if atrocities had happened on the mainland on the same scale as in Northern Ireland he often felt there would have been much more discussion that had actually taken place. It was striking that there had been no major debate on Northern Ireland during the lifetime of this Parliament - only statements by the Secretary of State after terrorist outrages. The Northern Ireland political parties had tried to stick to the spirit of what they had agreed. He had no recriminations. The talks, however, had built up expectations and if those expectations were disappointed then the para-militaries could feed on that disappointment. That in turn could reduce turn-out at the forthcoming elections. The moderates stayed at home, while the extremists turned out. If this afternoon's meeting could show politics at work that would be a good thing.

Mr. Hume believed that the security forces were doing their level best. The complaints that came from one side of the community or another were a symptom of a deeper disease. Fundamental to the question of law and order was an agreement on the basis on which relationships in Ireland were conducted. He wanted to propose that work should be set in hand on a declaration on the political future. That would not lead to

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immediate agreement on institutions. His idea was based on his view that the nature of the problem had changed. The old British fear that Ireland's links with Europe were a risk to Britain's security by the back door was gone. The central relationship was now that between the Unionist people and the rest of Ireland. All the problems associated with Unionist opposition to home rule, the one-party state, Sunningdale, the Anglo-Irish Agreement, etc., could be put down to the fact that the Unionists had not worked out a satisfactory relationship with the rest of Ireland. Until that relationship was settled to the mutual satisfaction of the Unionists and the rest of the people of Ireland, nothing else would work. In the past the question of Irish unity had been seen in terms of conquest or assimilation. The real problem was that the people of Ireland were a divided people. That, not territory, was the issue. That problem could only be resolved by agreement. Whatever was worked out should be endorsed North and South on the same day. Once the people as a whole had spoken, then the terrorists would be taking on the Irish people as a whole and would in turn be tackled on that basis. The differences in Ireland should not be seen as a threat. They should be accommodated. We had to find the common ground. Institutions reflecting differences and the shared interests would constitute a real strategy for dealing with terrorism. That would take time but a declaration of principles would be a very good start. It could be turned into detail after the General Election. A lot of good work was already being done in terms of economic development and inward investment. The IRA were not motivated by any coherent political philosophy. There was no Anglo-Irish quarrel over sovereignty. As regards articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution, he, Mr. Hume, could equally point to problems with the Government of Ireland Act. He noted as an important point that Mr. Reynolds had said that everything was on the table. But he advised against resurrecting these historical issues. They tended to bring back to the surface things which were otherwise buried. The important thing was to reach agreement between the communities about how they were going to live together - or live apart.

Dr. Alderdice said that he had found a very strong welcome among people in Northern Ireland for the Prime Minister's decision to call a meeting. People had approached him over the weekend asking that the meeting should be a signal for the start of a new peace process. There was a real yearning for progress and a sense in which the violence was now uniting people, not dividing them. Protestant families who had suffered were sending messages of sympathy to Catholic families and vice versa. The violence arose out of the political problem. People had been seduced into violence. But the Northern Ireland people were not naturally violent or criminal. An agreement on security was not sufficient without a political agreement, any more than a political agreement would work unless backed up by security measures. He was in his mid-30s. Unlike the others round the table, he could not remember a period in Northern Ireland without violence. He did not want his children to have the same experience. But the opportunities for politicians in Northern Ireland to exercise political responsibility had vanished. It was essential to rebuild political responsibility. He had two specific themes to propose:

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- (i) Cooperation. We had to be united in order to defeat the terrorists on the basis of the old World War II adage "United we stand, divided we fall". At the moment, there were lots of people who had suspicions about terrorist activity but kept quiet about them. Cooperation was crucial to security. He agreed with the Prime Minister that talks should not be delayed. The people of Northern Ireland were giving a message that they wanted the politicians to get on with it.
- (ii) Commitment. Dr. Alderdice welcomed the Prime Minister's personal interest in calling the meeting and in visiting Northern Ireland. The issue must not be allowed to lapse down the agenda again. What was needed was a consistent commitment from the highest level.

Mr. Paisley said that, while he was glad of the meeting, it was taking place rather late in the day for Northern Ireland. We needed to look at some hard facts. Facts and figures could not be ignored. He regretted the absence of Mr. Kilfedder. One fact was that Mr. Alderdice had only 5.2 per cent of the vote against 20 per cent or more for Unionists like himself. The kind of programme outlined by Mr. Hume and Mr. Alderdice was the sort of thing the British Government had been persuaded of for the last 20 years. He could agree that the meeting should send the clearest commitment against terrorism. What was lacking was a clear commitment from the Government to the democratic process. The ending of Stormont had been a mistake. The majority of those slaughtered in Northern Ireland were Unionists. John Hume had said that the territorial quarrel had gone. If that view was shared by the Prime Minister then the Unionists should not be at the meeting. There was a quarrel between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Mr. Reynolds was complaining about the Government of Ireland Act (Mr. Hume said that this was not what he had said). The Irish Government's claim to Northern Ireland, supported by the Irish Supreme Court, buttressed the criminals. The Irish Government had created a Berlin Wall which only they could dismantle. Mr. Brooke had said that he would look forward to listening to what the Unionists had to say to Dublin about Articles 2 and 3 of the Constitution. This had shocked him. The British Government should have been arguing against those Articles. Mr. Paisley was not in favour of independence. He wanted the Union. But he would prefer independence to unification. The Union was not negotiable. He would not agree to any declaration that involved negotiations with an all-Ireland connection. Mr. Reynolds idea of an all-Ireland forum was obnoxious to Unionists. The internal affairs of Northern Ireland were for Northern Ireland and Westminster alone. The Unionist leaders derived their power from the people. The Protestant people were the most tolerant and long suffering in the world. Had they not been, they could have unleashed something which would have been unmanageable. Yet he never heard a eulogy of the Protestant people, who gave their sons and daughters to the RUC, the UDR and to safeguarding Northern Ireland. Now those same people were at the end of their tether. Once democracy was

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debated, then other elements could come in. Security policies in Northern Ireland had failed and would continue to fail. He, Mr. Paisley, knew the grass roots on both sides. The terrorists would not be converted from their mafia and criminal activities. Mr. Molyneaux had been right to suggest that the perception in Northern Ireland was that Britain was getting out. The changes that were being made in the UDR showed enormous insensitivity. PIRA had killed fifty times as many people in Northern Ireland as the UDR ever had. The British Government had got rid of the Special Constabulary who had been responsible for keeping peace on the streets and keeping the IRA at bay. He was grateful to the Prime Minister for listening to the requests for help which Northern Ireland MEPs had made of him over EC expenditure schemes and for the results that had been produced. But the matters that were being discussed today were much more serious. They were not matters for a declaration but for a clear demonstration by the British Government that it would deal with the IRA. He had warned before about the problems of extradition. Any all-Ireland vote, as proposed by Mr. Hume, would be an anathema. Why should a foreign country vote to determine his future? He himself was a humble man, but a straight one.

The Prime Minister said that he would try to draw the common ground from what had been said. The first point in common was the determination to deal with the terrorists. No-one had had a word to say for them. There was no question of the Brits getting out of Northern Ireland. People in Northern Ireland were being murdered. The Army was there. Despite enormous demands elsewhere on the Army, we had been prepared to put troops and keep them there. We had put more in. That was an odd way to signal that we were getting out. We were building up the RUC. Mr. Reynolds' name had been mentioned. The Prime Minister knew him from their time as Finance Ministers together. He had spoken to him and they had agreed to institutionalise the twice a year meetings which he had originally agreed with Mr. Haughey. They would meet as soon as possible to discuss European matters and other matters, including border security.

The Prime Minister noted that Mr. Hume had said that there might have been more discussion if bombs had been going off in London rather than Northern Ireland. In the few months he had been Prime Minister, he had not treated Northern Ireland as a backwater. We should agree here and now that this evening's meeting would not be an isolated meeting. We should have other meetings like this one from time to time. Extradition had been mentioned. While the Maastricht Treaty did not bear directly on Anglo-Irish extradition, what had been agreed there did demonstrate a climate for action which would be helpful to us.

Dr. Alderdice, the Prime Minister said, had referred to the unwillingness of people, not terrorists themselves, to come forward against the terrorists. All the people round the table were themselves potential targets. They had put their heads above the parapet. He wanted to try and build on their commitment to encourage others to take a stand: to make the terrorists outlaws on every street.

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The Prime Minister noted that Mr. Paisley thought there was a lack of commitment to the democratic process but Constitutional talks were about the democratic process. The talks that afternoon had shown unity among those present in supporting the security forces in trying to bring criminals to justice. Mr. Paisley interjected that the support of the security forces must involve Mr. Hume encouraging his people to join those forces. The Prime Minister did not respond to that point. He said that, as regards the Anglo-Irish Agreement, that was a reflection of a practical and unavoidable fact. We shared the same island. We needed the security cooperation of the Republic of Ireland. Of course we would like them to renounce their claim. But the existence of the claim should not be a barrier to cooperation against terrorism. Cooperation could be better in our view. That was one of the matters he would wish to discuss with Mr. Reynolds. He hoped it had been accepted that the British Government was committed to providing the resources necessary. He thought those present had also agreed that cooperation with the Republic of Ireland against terrorism was necessary. That left the more difficult question of whether we were able to continue a substantive political dialogue with a view to fresh talks as soon as possible. He knew it was difficult but it would pay rich dividends if it was doable. He hoped that in the light of the commitment we, the Government, were making the Northern Ireland parties would consider reconvening before the General Election. That would be a stunning signal to those whom Northern Ireland politicians represented.

Mr. Paisley said that his people had to sit down at council meetings with people from Sinn Fein who were involved in terrorism. Why should they be forced to do that? We must deal with Sinn Fein. He would be happy to consider the Prime Minister's proposal but the Prime Minister should indicate that he was taking on this issue.

Mr. Molyneaux referred to the statement issued on 27 January. It was very often the case that if the four leaders got round the table on their own, issues could be resolved. Would it commend itself if they agreed to engage in that first step?

Dr. Alderdice said that as a humble Belfast councillor he, unlike the others round the table, actually had to sit with Sinn Fein. He knew the problem Mr. Paisley had described but it was one of many issues that needed to be addressed. The Prime Minister had asked them to consider moving forward and making a commitment to resumed talks. He was ready to commit himself, having been very heartened by the Prime Minister's commitment to take a solid and continuing interest in Northern Ireland.

"I put not my trust in princes" said Mr. Paisley. He had had promises before. He did not question the Prime Minister's integrity but something definitely was needed on security. It was not the Unionists who had broken off the talks. It was the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland who had said that they could not continue. The Unionists would talk but they had to bear in mind their responsibilities to their people. They had to have something tangible. They were very unhappy about the

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policies of the Labour Party. He would not sit and negotiate about the future of the union. He would not make a commitment to carry on talks after the election. He would consider doing what the Prime Minister proposed but his worries remained.

The Prime Minister asked Mr. Paisley what, in specific terms, he would have us do beyond the increase in troops that he had described. An essential prerequisite to other steps was having sufficient people on the ground. Was our commitment not an indication of our serious intent? Mr. Paisley said he would hand over a dossier listing his proposals. He hoped the Prime Minister would give it careful attention. On past occasions troops had been brought in and then taken away without any notice being given to the Northern Ireland political leaders. The Prime Minister said he would make two points. The first was that he had put more troops into Northern Ireland in the last week than Mr. Paisley would ever have thought likely. The second was that he would not hide from the Northern Ireland politicians. If they thought that he was ratting on them they could say so ("We will" said Mr. Paisley). There would be further meetings.

After further consultation it was agreed that the meetings described in paragraph 4 of the 27 January statement would take place and that, in addition, the four Northern Ireland political leaders would get together to see if they could find a basis for resuming substantive talks on constitutional progress.

There was also a discussion of what should be said to the press. The Prime Minister agreed with the leaders the line which he subsequently used with the media. I enclose the COI transcript.

I am copying this letter to Simon Webb (Ministry of Defence), Richard Gozney (Foreign and Commonwealth Office) and Sonia Phippard (Cabinet Office).

June,
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William Fittall, Esq.,
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