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BRITISH PAPER ON
"THE GOVERNMENT OF NORTHERN IRELAND - PROPOSALS FOR
FURTHER DISCUSSION"

JULY 1980

SUMMARY, COMMENTS AND REACTION

PART I : INTRODUCTION (Para. 1-7)

The guiding principles within which the British Government propose to move towards a devolved form of government for Northern Ireland are re-stated in the Introduction. These principles, which are set out in the 1979 Working Paper, include the following:-

- the necessity for any new arrangements to be acceptable to both sides of the community;
- responsibility for law and order to remain with Westminster.

Following further consultation with the main parties, the British Government would hope to put forward specific legislative proposals in the next Parliamentary session, based on the guiding principles re-stated in the Discussion Paper, which is the 5th in a series of such documents issued since 1972.

The 1980 Conference of Northern Ireland representatives, from which the Discussion Paper in a sense emerged, was not intended to be a forum for discussion of constitutional change. It is clear from the Discussion Paper that the British Government continue to view the Northern Ireland problem as an exclusively internal British matter. The guiding principles along which the Paper proceeds are, therefore, much narrower than the approach to the problem advanced by the Irish Government and summarised in their reaction to the Paper on 2nd July in these terms:-

"....the problem cannot be solved in a Northern Ireland context alone. (The Government) wish to see the problem raised to a new inter-governmental level and considered in the context of closer political cooperation between the British and Irish Governments. They believe that a declaration by the British Government of their interest in encouraging Irish unity by consent would advance the situation".

PART II : NEW ARRANGEMENTS: THE WIDER CONTEXT (Paras. 8-22)

The basic needs of the people of Northern Ireland are listed in Part II as being:-

peace;
reconciliation;
political stability, and
economic reconstruction.

The Discussion Paper emphasises that stable political institutions are required if these needs are to be met. For any such institutions to function, participation in them by the minority is imperative. The guarantee to the majority community is again reiterated, but the Paper does not question the legitimacy of those who "aspire to Irish unity" and who may "pursue their own objectives by legitimate and peaceful means". The "unique relationship" between the peoples of these islands is noted, in words drawn partly from the Downing Street communiqué of 21st May, and the Paper states that an acceptable form of government in Northern Ireland would "... encourage the growth of a new and deeper relationship between the UK and the Republic of Ireland".

Part II is quite specific on the operational guidelines for any new devolved government in Northern Ireland: there would be no return of security powers to a local administration and the Secretary of State would continue to have the determining role in matters of public finance. "Direct rule" as a longterm solution is excluded and so too, by implication, is any return to the pre-1972 Stormont system. Moreover, the importance of minority participation in any internal Northern

Ireland settlement is considered to be the sine qua non of any political advance. Predictably, the guarantee to the majority community and the undertaking that constitutional change can only come about by consent are clearly re-stated. It is of interest however that the Paper goes further than previous documents of this nature in reflecting a more balanced, indeed "neutral" British Government view of the two communities in Northern Ireland.

Paragraphs 20-22 deal with the wider issue of Anglo-Irish relations and together constitute the only reference in the Paper to the "Irish dimension". But although the Paper strikes a cordial note in these paragraphs, by the manner in which relations between the two islands are summarised, the Paper does not hold out any prospect of enlargement of the "Irish dimension". These paragraphs in fact amount to no more than an acknowledgement of the Irish Government's interest in a peaceful solution and there is no suggestion that the Irish Government would play an active, far less institutionalised, role in bringing about a solution, either of an internal Northern Ireland kind, or otherwise.

PART III: PROPOSALS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION (Paras. 23-62)

Paragraphs 23-62 fall into two separate but closely-related parts:-

- (a) The overall framework for any devolved government in Northern Ireland (as summarised in para. 61), and
- (b) The provision to be made for minority participation in the institutions of Government (as summarised in para. 62)

The overall framework lays down guidelines to cover the form of, and method of election to an Assembly, which would have power to legislate on certain transferred matters and from which an Executive would be drawn. There would in addition be Departmental Committees with a range of powers, as well as an Advisory Council for consultation with the Secretary of State.

PART IV: CONCLUSIONS (Paras. 63-65)

The Discussion Paper's conclusions again exclude "direct rule" as a longterm solution and repeat that the British Government will endeavour to transfer certain powers to locally elected representatives. Further consultation with the Northern Ireland parties is to follow and if proposals on the lines of those in the Discussion Paper are accepted, legislation would be introduced at Westminster. But if such acceptance is not forthcoming, other alternatives would be considered, including the possibility of a progressive transfer of certain powers to a locally elected Assembly. This possibility appears to be a fallback in the event that the main proposals prove to be unacceptable, and may even be a hint that the British Government itself does not realistically hope for success with the proposals set out in detail in the Discussion Paper.