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10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

26 February 1986

Dear Jim,

**PRIME MINISTER'S MEETING WITH CHURCH OF IRELAND BISHOPS**

The Prime Minister held a meeting this afternoon with a delegation of Church of Ireland Bishops from both sides of the border.

The Prime Minister began by giving the delegation an account of her meeting with Unionist Party leaders yesterday and the outcome of it. We had not hitherto been informed by the Party leaders concerned of any change in the position which they had adopted at the end of that meeting. Archbishop Eames said that there had been great feelings of hope yesterday in Northern Ireland at the reported outcome of the meeting. These had been dashed by the catastrophic news this morning of the Unionists' rejection of further discussions with the Government.

In subsequent discussion a number of points of interest were made:

- the point had still not got across to a large number of Unionists that the establishment of a devolved administration in Northern Ireland would greatly reduce the scope of the Intergovernmental Conference. It would be helpful if the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach could issue a joint statement to this effect. It should be cast in simple and graphic terms.
- there should be less secrecy about the proceedings of the Intergovernmental Conference. Secrecy gave rise to suspicion and misrepresentation.
- it was suggested that Article 5(b) of the Anglo-Irish Agreement offered a means to persuade the Irish Government to repeal Articles 2 and 3 of

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the Republic's Constitution. The Prime Minister doubted whether this was practicable. Any change would require a referendum and this was likely to succeed only once it was clear that the Anglo-Irish Agreement was working successfully. Any suggestion for repeal would need to originate with the Irish Government rather than the United Kingdom if it was to have a chance of success.

- there was a strong feeling in the North that the Irish Republic deliberately exaggerated the minority's grievances in order to build a climate of international criticism directed at the Unionist majority.
- there was concern in the RUC that the police would find themselves whipping boys once the marching season started. They would be in the difficult position of enforcing the law against the only section of the community which had supported them in the past.
- SDLP attitudes could be a good deal more helpful. They had conspicuously failed to take any initiative since signature of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. They appeared to be waiting for the Government to back the Unionists against the wall and face them down in a confrontation. The SDLP were giving the impression that the minority would in future run the Province. The Government should press the SDLP hard to be more positive.
- it was suggested that the reason that the Unionist Party leaders had reneged on their earlier agreement to further discussions with the Government was that they had not been offered enough to convince Unionist opinion in the Province that such discussions would be worthwhile. The Prime Minister said that the Unionist leaders had been offered four substantial concessions. If these were to be dismissed as "not enough" there would be little incentive for the Government to seek further discussions with the Unionists. "Don't make me give up."
- there was a widespread belief among the Unionist community that a campaign of protest against the Agreement would eventually succeed in forcing the Government to back away from it.
- it was suggested by Archbishop Eames that the Government should choose its words carefully in reacting to possible strike action on 3 March. The

Prime Minister said that the Government would have to condemn any such action. She saw it as the first step along a path which sensible Unionists feared but others wanted to tread. It was the Government's duty to strengthen the hand of those who rejected strikes and violence.

I am copying this letter to Len Appleyard (Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Michael Stark (Cabinet Office).

*Yours sincerely,*

*Charles Powell*

(C. D. POWELL)

Jim Daniell, Esq.,  
Northern Ireland Office.

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