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NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE
GREAT GEORGE STREET,
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Parliamentary Under Secretary of State

PRIME MINISTER

Prime Minister

*Content will these efforts to promote
on Northern Ireland policy overseas?*

Yes

A.J.C. 12/3

NORTHERN IRELAND: THE OVERSEAS INFORMATION EFFORT

Publicising Her Majesty's Government's Northern Ireland policy overseas, especially in the United States, is a task performed by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in very close consultation with the Northern Ireland Office. As you may know, Jim Prior has asked me to take a special interest in the subject and he and Peter Carrington thought you would like to have a report on a reassessment of this effort, which has been carried out since the ending of the difficult time we had during the hunger strike last year.

2. Our reassessment follows a review conducted by a senior official of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Mr Kelvin White, towards the end of the hunger strike. He found that in important respects we had weathered that storm rather better than many had feared. In the United States the press, the Administration, politicians and other opinion-formers had received and were themselves expressing, a reasonably balanced picture. David Trefgarne and I have, however, been concerned about the difficulty of countering sensationalist reporting by the popular press and on TV, although our posts did an excellent job in very difficult circumstances replying to biased material wherever and whenever that seemed likely to do more good than harm. The ending of the hunger strike and other subsequent events means that some of the judgments in that report have been overtaken by events.

3. Acute peaks of media interest, as during the hunger strike, will, we believe, be interspersed by quieter periods. We must be better prepared for the peaks which can hit us suddenly and that means a continuing effort to get our case across. The FCO see no case for a radical restructuring of their staffing of United States posts, although David Trefgarne, who visited British Information Services, New York as part of this reassessment, will see the posts are adequately staffed. The Washington Embassy had already reallocated staff to devote more resources to the Information Effort. The main changes subsequently required by Mr White's report relate to the support provided from London, in both the FCO and the NIO, and from Belfast. These have necessitated one or two additional Foreign and Commonwealth Office staff in the relevant sections in London.

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4. The main features of the arrangements now established, and the programme we shall be following in the immediate future, are as follows:-

- (a) There is now a Northern Ireland Overseas Information Committee, drawn mainly from NIO, FCO and COI, of which I shall normally take the chair. Its role will be to co-ordinate and monitor the information effort; to identify opportunities to get our message across; and to identify developments in Provisional Sinn Fein propaganda tactics, and ensure that we have effective material to counter it. It will concentrate primarily, but not exclusively on the US - the Communist Party in France has shown an opportunist tendency to support PIRA, and there is growing interest in the European Parliament. Information work in this field is a three-way process: needs may be identified in posts abroad, in London or in Belfast; and to meet them may require an input from one or more of those places. The committee will fulfil a useful function as a clearing house.
- (b) The Central Office of Information have provided a film for use with journalists and selected overseas audiences. Bernard Ingham has already shown it to the US lobby in London and I have shown it to the Foreign Press Association. On both occasions it created a favourable impression. It is too soon to assess its impact abroad but we believe that its deliberately educational exposition of the origins of the deep-seated problems of Northern Ireland struck the right note. We shall update it as necessary.
- (c) We have given extensive help to the three major United States television companies to prepare features on the real nature of the IRA, the NORAIID link and so on.
- (d) Feature articles are being commissioned, some of which (including a forthright denunciation of the IRA by Gerry Fitt) have already been placed in United States' newspapers.
- (e) We are extending the range of background briefs on particular topics, and existing briefs (on for example, the extensive safeguards for the accused in Diplock courts; why baton rounds have to be used) are regularly updated.
- (f) I will be keeping in close touch with US journalists in London and encouraging other Ministers to do the same: they are a key target.
- (g) David Trefgarne and I expect shortly to have a report from a public relations consultant in the United States on whether there are additional ways of reaching a wider range of opinions. (We are not contemplating handing our public

relations effort over to an outside agency: but some monitoring of our efforts and some "in house" professional public relations advice may prove helpful).

- (h) We are promoting and assisting visits by moderate Northern Ireland spokesmen to the United States, eg Harold McCusker MP and Austin Currie of the SDLP are undertaking separate tours this month.
- (i) The development of Anglo-Irish relations is a matter of great interest in the United States - the creation of the Intergovernmental Council has gone down very well. We can get some advantage by judicious use of such developments.
- (j) Interest in the United States in possible political progress in Northern Ireland is building up fast. Charles Wick, producer of "Let Poland be Poland" and a close confidant and public relations adviser of President Reagan, emphasised to us when in London recently that this more than any other factor would win understanding of our position in United States' eyes. If the Government decide upon any kind of move forward, we should need to exploit it in the United States, and Peter Carrington agrees that it would be helpful for Jim Prior to visit the United States after any announcement is made.
- (k) I shall be keeping in touch with backbenchers, some of whom have been critical of our past efforts. I am arranging for those interested to see the Central Office of Information film, and we shall be putting cuttings from the United States press in the House of Commons' Library regularly so that Members may see that the American press have not been as uniformly unhelpful as some believe.
- (l) It is necessary to use our judgment on balancing our efforts in countering IRA propaganda with the commercial need to emphasise normality and thus encourage inward investment in the Province. That balance will vary from time to time; both needs have to be borne in mind.

5. In the main, our approach is primarily educational. However, we learnt from the hunger strike how to be more aggressive when necessary. The "Fact Files" we published, spelling out bluntly the hunger strikers' crimes, had a valuable effect and the Provisional IRA's spokesmen have provided excellent opportunities, which we use to the full, to emphasise their revolutionary Marxist sympathies. A higher profile approach involving advertising and more extensive public relations techniques would be too easily discounted as mere propaganda and would be very much more expensive. David Trefgarne and I are confident that our available resources are now well-organised to be deployed to the best advantage.

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6. I am copying this minute to the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, to the Lord President, because of his responsibility for the co-ordination of Government information, to the Chief Whip, because of the backbench exercise and to Sir Robert Armstrong.

N.S.

NICHOLAS SCOTT

// March 1982

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