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10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

11 January 1984

PIRA THREAT TO SUPERMARKET CHAIN

Your Secretary of State called on the Prime Minister this evening to brief her on the latest situation, following a conversation he had had with Mr. Garfield Weston.

Mr. Prior said that he had known Mr. Weston for some time. Although he was a tough character, he was very severely shaken by the present threat. The PIRA had threatened to assassinate four people namely Mr. Weston himself and his brother and two other members of the firm who had been involved in the Tidey affair. In addition there was a threat to kidnap or possibly assassinate senior executives of the firm and to bomb the firm's properties in both the North and South of Ireland.

Mr. Prior had put to Mr. Weston all the arguments against giving in to blackmail. Mr. Weston was instinctively sympathetic to the arguments and was not concerned about his own safety, but he believed that the current situation could make it impossible for him to continue to operate a business in the North and the South. Moreover, he could quickly lose senior executives who were extremely frightened. Some members of his staff, including Mr. Tidey, were advising him to yield.

The PIRA were demanding £2m at this stage. They had said that if this demand was not met they would assassinate and kidnap others and any kidnap would be accompanied by a demand for £5m within 48 hours.

The original threat had been delivered one week ago and the time given to meet the demand would expire tonight. There had been no contact with the PIRA during the week and the intermediary had now departed. Mr. Weston was waiting for the PIRA to make further contact.

Your Secretary of State offered immediate protection for two of the named individuals and said he believed that the Canadian authorities and the Garda would give protection to the two members of the firm who were in Canada and the Irish Republic respectively. The Permanent Under Secretary, Northern Ireland Office,

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would be visiting Belfast tomorrow and would seek the Chief Constable's advice on the threat. Mr. Weston had said that he did not want further protection now since he believed that this would escalate things. But he promised to keep in touch with Mr. Prior about developments.

Mr. Prior had stressed to him that he was speaking to him both on the Prime Minister's behalf and as a friend. By buying off one threat, he could create another. At a moment when the PIRA were short of money, a windfall of £2m would be extremely useful to them. By yielding to blackmail, the lives of others might be put at risk.

Mr. Prior said that his impression was that Mr. Weston would reflect further before deciding what to do. Some members of his staff would continue to urge that he pay the sum demanded. Mr. Weston was torn between the issue of principle and loyalty to his firm and his colleagues. He confirmed, in answer to Mr. Prior's questions, that not only had he paid no money to the PIRA but he had made no agreement to pay money.

The Prime Minister agreed with Mr. Prior that the Government had no alternative but to stick to the advice which it had given to Mr. Weston.

I am not copying this letter elsewhere since much of the information in it is not new. Should you wish to copy it to others for essential operational reasons, I should be grateful if you would first consult me.

A. J. COLES

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Northern Ireland Office