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NOTE OF A MEETING BETWEEN THE PRIME MINISTER AND MR JOHN HUME MP AT 6.00 P.M. ON THURSDAY 9TH FEBRUARY 1984

John Hume talked to the Prime Minister about three separate topics:-

1. He sought to emphasise the importance which the SDLP attached to the New Ireland Forum. John Hume regarded the Forum as the proper alternative to the SDLP's joining and participating in the Northern Ireland Assembly. The SDLP were boycotting the Assembly because they were convinced that the Protestant community in Northern Ireland would set their views resolutely and unmoveably against any power sharing. They had done this in the context of the debacle of the Sunningdale conference; in the context also of the Northern Ireland convention; and in the context of the proposals put forward in the early 1980s under Humphrey Atkins' leadership. The SDLP believe that they would lose all electoral credibility if they went along with the new Assembly after so many rebuffs in the past. Hence their negative attitude towards it and the positive enthusiasm with which they now embraced the New Ireland Forum. Referring to the latter, John Hume expected it to come up with some realistic proposals for the future constitutional development of Ireland, not necessarily based upon the essential pre-requisite of a unitary state. Various alternatives, including two separate centres of government, might well emerge from the Forum.
2. John Hume spoke about his misgivings concerning what he described as the "disintegration" of the Catholic community. As an example he cited his own town of Londonderry, which before the struggle started in 1968,

had the lowest crime rate in the United Kingdom, despite then having the highest unemployment rate. But things were now different. For example a new generation of 18 year olds, who were only 4 in 1968, had now come of age knowing only a background of violence. Law and Order had, in his view, to be based on a willing consensus within the population. But no such consensus existed in the Roman Catholic community, and no voice of constitutional loyalty was available to them.

3. John Hume commented briefly on the prospects for provisional Sinn Fein in response to a question from the Prime Minister. It remained strong on motivation, fuelled by the hunger strike deaths, the general lack of political movement and the apparent success of violence. But in John Hume's view, it suffered from sharp internal contradictions which were likely, increasingly, to cripple its development. The main contradiction was the dual attempt to seek and to evaluate work and jobs and economic progress in Northern Ireland whilst at the same time tacitly supporting and endorsing the violent bombing campaign which damaged and destroyed jobs and the economy.

MICHAEL ALISON

10th February 1984