

E.R.

PAB/800/RE

NOTE FOR THE RECORD



① Sir Ewart [initials]
② Pow
12/4

64/4

cc: PS/S of S (I&B)
PS/PUS (I&B)
✓ PS/Sir E Bell
Mr Merifield
Miss Davies, Mr Angel
Mr Reeve
Mr Abbott

"SPOTLIGHT" DISCUSSION ON DEVOLUTION

1. The BBC television programme "Spotlight", broadcast on Friday 8 April, featured a discussion between Jim Molyneaux, Peter Robinson and Oliver Napier on the prospects for devolution. The SDLP chose not to participate.
2. Mr Molyneaux began the discussion by arguing that the forthcoming general election provided an opportunity for Assembly members to secure devolution on a majority rule basis. He claimed that the Government was anxious to achieve further political progress in the Province and might be persuaded to reconsider the terms of the Northern Ireland Act 1982 before the next election. After the election, the prospects of securing devolution would be more remote. The UUP were therefore determined to "have one more go" before the election was called.
3. Replying for the DUP, Mr Robinson accused Mr Molyneaux of having no interest in devolution and of trying to wreck the Assembly. He dismissed Mr Molyneaux's arguments as naive and said that the Government had no intention of "forcing the pace" in Northern Ireland this side of an election. In order to achieve devolution, Assembly members had to show that they could behave responsibly. After a shaky start, they were doing just that: the Committee system was working well and was bringing its influence to bear on the activities of Government. Unlike Mr Molyneaux and Mr Powell, the DUP did want to secure devolution. But they would not risk losing the Assembly which, despite its many drawbacks, was an improvement on "unbridled direct rule".
4. Mr Napier agreed that it was unrealistic to expect the Government to change its mind about the conditions for devolving powers in the run-up to an election. His party were committed to partnership in government. Alliance would not support any proposals for devolution unless they provided a role for those elected representatives of the nationalist community who rejected violence. He said that it was because of the intransigence of unionist politicians that the SDLP were now

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pursuing their proposals for a Forum and were facing the challenge of Sinn Fein at the polls. He urged the UUP and the DUP to reconsider their attitude to powersharing. Under pressure from both Mr Molyneaux and Mr Robinson, Mr Napier explained that if the Assembly were to propose some system of powersharing which his party thought was reasonable, but which the SDLP rejected, Alliance would be prepared to reconsider its attitude to devolution and might then support proposals which did not provide a role for representatives of the nationalist community.

5. Although none of the party spokesmen said anything which was new or unexpected, the discussion confirmed that Mr Molyneaux is almost certain to press the issue of devolution in the Assembly when it reconvenes. Motions on this topic have been tabled by both the UUP and the DUP and a debate is scheduled for 10 May. As reported in my minute of 1 April, neither motion can succeed without Alliance Party support. The most likely outcome, therefore, is a heated debate followed by the defeat of both motions. This would no doubt suit the DUP and the Alliance Party. Mr Molyneaux presumably calculates that he can use such a debate to discredit both the Assembly and his main political opponents, the DUP. He must realise, however, that forcing the pace in this way will not be popular with all the UUP's Assembly members and it remains to be seen what effect his tactics will have on the unity of his party.

6. The three party leaders are due to resume their series of informal meetings tomorrow (12 April) providing a further opportunity for some kind of compromise to be reached. One possibility is that Mr Paisley with Mr Napier's help, may be able to persuade Mr Molyneaux to withdraw his motion in favour of a general debate on devolution, although this looks increasingly unlikely. In this context, the speech by Jim Allister at the DUP conference over the weekend is of interest. Mr Allister proposed that, as an interim arrangement, Assembly members should seek the transfer of legislative power, leaving executive responsibility for the time being with NIO Ministers. According to Mr Allister this would put the Assembly in a position of real influence despite not having executive power and would be a significant step towards full devolution.

S Hewitt.
S G HEWITT
PAB
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