

DOR.

PAB/1441/GC

NOTE FOR THE RECORD



cc. PS/S of S (L&B) - M
PS/PUS (L&B) - M
PS/Sir E Bell ✓
Mr Merifield
Miss Davies
Mr Angel
Mr Abbott
Mr Edis

ASSEMBLY DEBATE ON DEVOLUTION

The Assembly debate on devolution, which began at 3.15 pm yesterday, ended this morning after nearly 19 hours. This was the Assembly's first all-night sitting. At the end of the debate, the DUP motion was defeated as were the amendments tabled by the Official Unionists and the Alliance Party. The net result is that, for the time-being at least, the Assembly will not be establishing a new Committee to examine the devolution of powers because the parties are unable to agree on its terms of reference.

2. This was a fairly acrimonious debate which should be seen in the context of ^{the} impending election campaign. The postures adopted by the two main protagonists will be faithfully copied on the hustings and the invective levelled against other parties' positions will be constantly echoed in the coming weeks. The DUP accused the Official Unionists of giving only half-hearted support to the Assembly, of being bitterly divided on the question of devolution and of having tried to wreck the Assembly in its early days. Although Jim Allister's proposal on legislative devolution was again expanded on at length by its author, Dr Paisley introduced it as only one of the measures which could be considered. It still appears to lack full DUP endorsement.

3. For their part, the UUP argued that the Assembly was a sham and that steps should be taken to secure devolution, on a majority-rule basis, as a matter of urgency. The straight integration solution does not appear to have been mentioned. Spokesman for the Alliance Party made it clear that they would not support any plans for devolution unless they provided a role for the SDLP and accused both unionist parties of adopting an intransigent attitude to the question of power-sharing. On the unionist benches, only John Carson (UUP) was prepared to consider offering concessions to the SDLP in order to get them into the Assembly.

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4. Now that this debate is out of the way, it may be possible for the DUP and UUP to agree on a compromise motion which will allow for the setting up of a devolution committee. However it is hard to see how such agreement can be achieved before the general election takes place. The bitterness of some of the exchanges during the debate will not improve the prospects of any electoral deals being struck between the UUP and DUP.

5. Press coverage of the debate was routine, highlighting its marathon nature and quoting some of the choicer epithets. The whole proceeding smacked of farce and its anti-climatic ending will do nothing for the standing of the Assembly in the eyes of the population at large.

S Hewitt

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PAB

11 May 1983

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