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CC PS/SOS (~~B&E~~) - ~~M~~
 PS/Ministers (~~B&E~~) - ~~M~~
 PS/PUS (~~B&E~~) - ~~M~~
 Mr Brennan - ~~M~~
 Mr Bourne
 NI Perm Secs
 Mr Angel - ~~M~~
 Mr Merifield
 Mr Carvill
 Mr Buxton
 Mr Gilliland
 Mr Boys Smith - ~~M~~
 Mr Abbott - ~~M~~
 Mr Bickham - ~~M~~

PS/Sir Ewart Bell

THE POLITICAL SITUATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

The Secretary of State and all his Ministerial colleagues had an informal discussion on 24 January in Stormont Castle with officials about the current political situation in Northern Ireland. In addition to Ministers, those present were Mr Andrew, Sir Ewart Bell, Mr Brennan, Dr Quigley, Mr Bloomfield, Dr Hayes, Mr Merifield, Mr Carvill, and Mr Gilliland. Mr Needham, Mr Bickham and I were also present.

The meeting considered first the present position of the Assembly. In general, it had done useful work, particularly in its departmental committees. At the same time, it had not attracted much public interest. The absence of the SDLP, and now of the UUP, seriously weakened it. It was for consideration how long it could be expected to continue in its present form. Given the commitment of the DUP, and of the Alliance, it was likely that it might survive into the Summer, but perhaps with very limited credibility. Increasingly, it would be seen as the voice of the DUP, particularly if they elected a DUP member to succeed Mr Kilfedder as Speaker.

There were arguments, therefore, for proroguing the Assembly by about the end of February if the position remained unchanged. Certainly it would be very difficult to do so after then because of the imminence of the Forum report. Any prorogation in the aftermath of that Report would clearly be seen as a response to it. On the other hand, there were serious drawbacks in proroguing the Assembly before it was clear how Government policy might develop in the coming months.

The meeting considered possible alternative structures. One suggestion had been establishing three or perhaps eight regional councils in the Province which would be responsible for the administration of certain services. The Secretary of State would retain a veto. The elected majority would have power in each council, but it might be expected that in some councils the minority community's representatives would be in the majority. There were a number of difficulties in this proposal, including the possibility that Sinn Fein might assume power in some councils, and might additionally seek to secede from Northern Ireland. It was not clear whether it would be possible to identify appropriate powers for the councils which did not risk the rights of the minority being abused. And the Secretary of State could find himself in an invidious position if he had regularly to overturn the decisions of democratically elected local politicians.

While it was recognised that the possibility of regional councils might prove attractive to Unionists, it was important to identify some measures which would meet the principal concerns of the minority. Central to these was their alienation from the forces of law and order. Some had suggested that a border corridor jointly policed with the Republic, together with a joint Police Authority, might meet these concerns. But there would be practical difficulties. It was not clear how such a system might operate on the ground and whether it would in fact provide for more effective security arrangements. It might be preferable to look either for some less fundamental development like a joint agreement on police crossing the border or a joint CID group; or a more root and branch development with an all-Ireland police force. Another possibility was to establish separate arrangements for investigating complaints against the police and a structure for deciding on prosecutions which was jointly acceptable to both the UK and the Irish Governments.

The meeting recognised that there were few signs of movement among the political parties. The SDLP remained committed to the Forum; it would be very difficult for them either before or after the Forum reported to come into the Assembly unless the other political parties were prepared to make more substantial gestures than they seemed ready to do at present.

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There seemed no realistic prospect of the UUP's proposals for a regional authority being acceptable to the SDLP. Similarly, proposals by the UUP and by the DUP for administrative or legislative devolution seemed to give no place to the minority. It was worth considering, however, whether the Alliance Party might not be encouraged to put pressure on the DUP to make some conciliatory move under threat of their withdrawal from the Assembly. The prospects for the SDLP, however, looked bleak with the outcome of the Forum at best uncertain and with them continuing to appear ineffective in the face of Sinn Fein's constituency organisation. The European elections would provide some test of Mr Hume's position, but the Party depended very strongly on him. If Sinn Fein were to continue to overtake the SDLP, then this would require the Government fundamentally to rethink its commitment to the principle of cross-community support. It was for consideration whether either the UK or the Dublin Governments could do any more to bolster the SDLP's position.

It was suggested that the Northern Ireland politicians had shown time and again that they were not prepared to work together or to adopt more amenable stances. Unless they wished to make institutions work, they would find good reasons for objecting to any developments. On this argument, the possibility of making progress by small steps seemed remote. One answer might be a significant package of proposals, perhaps including regional government and security arrangements, which would offer something significant for all sides. Another might be to turn away from trying to involve locally elected representatives in the running of Northern Ireland. It might be most efficiently administered through appointed boards responsible to the Secretary of State.

The Secretary of State, concluding the discussion, said that in the light of what had been said it would be useful to give further thought to the possibility of developing local government through regional councils; the possibility of devolving some powers, such as agriculture, to the Assembly without necessarily involving a sharing of powers among the political parties; and considering what might be done in the security area to allow the minority community to identify more with the forces of law and order. There were considerable difficulties and drawbacks

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about various possibilities which had been discussed. But equally there were serious drawbacks about doing nothing. It would be necessary for the Government to have come to a clear view about political developments in Northern Ireland by the time the Forum had reported.

J. M. Lyon

J M LYON
Private Secretary

24th January 1984