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Question of financial assistance for the
Assembly of the Northern Irish people

The Inter-Departmental Unit on the North of Ireland considered this question at a meeting on 9th May, 1972 and agreed unanimously that the Government had entered into a financial commitment last year which would have to be honoured. In the course of the discussion on the subject it was suggested that before a political decision is taken in the matter various considerations - Northern Ireland political, domestic political and administrative - would have to be carefully weighed. In this connection the following points were made at the meeting:

- 1) The Assembly was established for political purposes and not for the relief of distress.
- 2) The future of the Assembly was in doubt because of the new political situation in the North and, more importantly, because of the centrifugal forces at work inside the SDLP.
- 3) The political wisdom of reactivating the Assembly at this time might be questionable as it might lead to a regrouping of unionist elements.
- 4) Would financial assistance from the Government be politically embarrassing to the most able and moderate members of the Assembly, John Hume and Austin Currie, having regard to the possibility of their being denounced by colleagues who are suspicious about co-operating with the Government?
- 5) Does the Government wish to gain a political foothold within the North and influence minority politics there, bearing in mind that the Labour and Official Sinn Féin parties are already active in both parts of the country (and that this fact, in some measure, accounts for internal difficulties within the SDLP)?
- 6) If financial assistance is to be given by the Government the following questions arise:
 - (a) how much? (It is believed that £10,000 would cancel existing debts but Mr. Hume's expectations are known to be higher than that;
 - (b) there would seem to be no alternative to a grant-in-aid which means that the transaction would have to be done openly;

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- (c) if the grant-in-aid is much in excess of £10,000 and is meant to be a once-and-for-all contribution which would thus cover more than one one year a possible administrative difficulty might arise with the Comptroller and Auditor General, as grants-in-aid are designed to cover one year at a time;
 - (d) an open Government contribution would almost certainly evoke opposition from the British which could be countered (i) by asserting our right to be involved in Northern politics and (ii) by indicating the benefit of our supporting moderate politics in the North.
- 7) The Unit noted that the Assembly had entertained hopes at one time of obtaining financial support from the main political parties in the Twenty-Six Counties and had had discussions with party leaders in that connection. The outcome of these discussions was not known to the Unit but it was felt that they were unlikely to be fruitful in the changed political situation in the North.
- 8) Mr. Hume seems presently of the opinion that the Assembly's role is ended but puts in the saver that it might be worthwhile to keep it ticking over in case the political picture should change again. In reply to a suggestion that the Government might now simply contribute enough to pay off bills - mainly advertising costs - he thought this unwise as it would eventually emerge that the advertising costs and the Government contribution cancelled each other out.