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REACTION TO THE DISCUSSION PAPER

The SDLP and Alliance parties have given a rather cautious welcome to the discussion document. Both Mr. Hume and Mr. Napier said on 2 July that they would like time to consider the new proposals carefully before making a firm response. Mr. Hume did however welcome the "firm statement" of principle that any new institutions of government which the minority cannot accept will not bring stability and so will not be worth having. He also noted the clear statement by the British Government of the need in the interests of peace and reconciliation to further the unique relationship between the people of the UK, N.I. and the Republic. Mr. Hume linked the above reference in the discussion paper to the agreement between the Taoiseach and Mrs. Thatcher to hold regular meetings and indicated that he viewed such meetings as part of the further consultations proposed by the British Government. Finally Mr. Hume welcomed the opportunity of further discussion on the two elements referred to above. The SDLP while relatively pleased with the discussion paper are likely to adopt a muted response in public so as not to weaken their negotiating position. The proposal to relate representation in the executive to the electoral strength of the parties is of course the alternative most favoured by the SDLP and is in fact similar to the proposal put forward by the SDLP at the constitutional conference.

Mr. Napier of the Alliance Party while not prepared to give a firm reaction at this stage indicated a willingness to enter into further consultations on the basis of the discussion paper. In accordance with Alliance party policy he expressed a strong preference for the power-sharing alternative outlined in the paper (option I).

Mr. Molyneux (OUP) speaking at Westminster warned that any attempt to resurrect the "rigged executive" of 1974 would be rejected decisively by the N.I. electorate. Although also critical of option no. 2 as a recipe for disaster involving "two rival cabinets" Mr. Molyneux stated later that he would be prepared to enter into bilateral discussions with the Secretary of State. He said that he would like to explore further the OUP policy of a system of individual select committees rather than the proposal for a "Council of the Assembly" (option 2).

Mr. Paisley of the DUP welcomed the non-involvement of the Irish Government in the process of discussion. Like Mr. Molyneaux he also warned that any attempt to have a government "so rigged that the minority by artificial devices can become a majority and exercise a veto" was unacceptable and would be rejected by the Northern Ireland electorate. Mr. Paisley stated later that while option no. 1 was completely unacceptable, option No. 2 "did provide a basis for discussion of majority rule as simple majority government".

While all four parties are now prepared to have further bilateral discussions with the British Government there is a clear and probably unbridgeable gap between the SDLP and Alliance (favouring option 1) and the OUP and DUP favouring a straight majority rule form of option 2. The document can however be seen as a definite set back from the Unionist point of view with its emphasis on the necessity for any proposal to have the acceptance of the minority and the return in option 1 to a straight forward power-sharing proposal. There does not appear to be any possibility on the basis of the initial reactions from the four main political parties of agreement being reached on either of the options presented in the report.

The Secretary of State in presenting the report to Westminster said that he would engage in the widest possible consultations on the discussion document. He does not appear to have any intention of recalling the constitutional conference but will engage in bilateral discussions with the parties thus drawing the OUP into the consultative process. These discussions should be completed by the Autumn and Mr. Atkins remains publicly optimistic that progress can be made. He has not elaborated on the unusual reference in para. 64 that in the absence of agreement the British Government will explore other ways of making the Government of Northern Ireland more responsive to the wishes of the people of Northern Ireland. It may simply mean that the Secretary of State is preparing a fall-back position if as seems likely agreement is not reached by the Northern Ireland political parties on a form of devolved government.