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2. The following were the main points which emerged in the course of these conversations:

Note of 23/10/78 by Mr. Sean O'halloran on Northern contacts

(a) Mr. Airey Neave's plan for local government

Our visit occurred immediately after a series of contacts held by Messrs. Neave and Biggs-Davison with the main political parties in Northern Ireland in an effort to interest them in the Conservative proposal for a study of local government structures. Both the SDLP and Alliance parties reaffirmed their opposition (previously made clear to the Conservatives through contacts with Mr. Ian Gow) to an upper tier of local government for Northern Ireland. In spite of protracted conversations with Messrs. Neave and Biggs-Davison neither party was altogether clear on the details of Neave's proposal.

To judge from the impressions of Alliance and SDLP contacts, Mr. Neave appears to envisage one directly elected council of about 100 members. The council would have real minority participation (nature unspecified) its powers would be decided by an independent commission and it would lead ultimately to devolved government. The SDLP were dismayed by the extent to which Neave seemed to be unaware of the various malpractices and manifestations of bigotry of certain loyalist dominated councils and reiterated their determination not to operate any upper tier of local government. They feel such an abstentionist attitude would have support of the minority community going beyond even the normal limits of SDLP support. Mr. Napier's impression of the exercise was that with the prospects of a general election receding, the Tories were in fact backing away from a commitment to the kind of straightforward, majority-dominated regional

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council the Unionists want and were edging back towards Mason's five point plan. He saw the main difference between Neave's and Mason's approach as being the idea of determining the powers of a council by independent commission. Napier thought (perhaps optimistically) that the opposition of the SDLP and Alliance to an upper tier of local government was making an impression in Conservative circles and that the Tory manifesto would now hedge its bets much more on this issue.