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NOTE OF A MEETING BETWEEN THE SECRETARY OF STATE, THE SPEAKER, AND NI ASSEMBLY PARTY LEADERS AT STORMONT CASTLE ON 6 DECEMBER 1982

The Secretary of State met the Speaker and Party leaders of the Assembly on 6 December to discuss the Assembly's proposals for a regular question time for Northern Ireland Office Ministers.

Those present were:-

Secretary of State
Sir Ewart Bell
Mr Merifield
Miss Davies
Mr Abbott
Mr Lyon

Mr Kilfedder
Mr Molyneaux
Dr Paisley
Mr Napier
Mr Kennedy

The Secretary of State had written to Mr Kilfedder on 29 November to say that he did not think Ministers would wish to get involved in a question time or in responding to adjournment debates. Instead he looked for more flexible arrangements. He suggested that to begin with there might be arrangements under which a Northern Ireland Minister might meet the Assembly approximately once a week.

Mr Kilfedder said that he recognised the practical difficulties for the Government of holding a regular question time. But in his view it was vital to the Assembly that members should be able to question Ministers.

In support of the Speaker, Mr Molyneaux said that it was important to provide a channel through which the actions of statutory bodies like the Housing Executive could be questioned. If this channel did not exist, it would build up a head of resentment against the Government and the Assembly itself. Dr Paisley said that since Mr Mitchell visited local council to answer their questions, Ministers should be prepared also to answer Assembly questions. The adjournment debate was a useful device for raising urgent issues, but these needed an answer. Departmental Committees were not the best means of securing this since the orderly conduct of their business would be seriously disrupted if members were to raise urgent matters affecting their constituents. The burden on Ministers of a regular question time would not be great - each would have to attend only once in 7 weeks. Question time would last only about one hour. Mr Napier said that a regular question time would give Ministers notice of the

and to the Assembly.

The Secretary of State said that he wished to do everything he could to help the Assembly. At the same time, he had to balance the interests of the Assembly with his responsibilities to Parliament. There were those who were looking for Parliamentary flights, and it was in everyone's interests that these should be avoided. The standing orders for the 1974 Assembly, which formed the basis of the present Assembly's standing orders were for an Assembly with devolved powers. They had not yet reached that stage. It would take time, and would require careful handling, to develop appropriate procedures for the Assembly with its existing responsibilities and Government Ministers. The Assembly had yet to establish its departmental committees. He hoped they would be the principal forum for questioning Ministers. But his letter had proposed that in the first place Ministers might attend the Assembly, either to lead a discussion, answer a debate or make a statement followed by questions, approximately once a week. For example, to take the present week's business, Mr Butler might have been invited at an appropriate stage during the debate, or at the end, to make a statement and perhaps answer questions on the Government's employment policies. He was not suggesting that this format should be followed for all time; but given the constitutional difficulties, and the importance of establishing a procedure that worked well and did not overload the system, he thought it best to meet the Assembly's wishes to question Ministers in ways he had outlined.

In discussion, the Speaker and Party leaders generally sympathised with the approach proposed by the Secretary of State. The Assembly Members suggested that Mr Butler should be invited to address the Assembly and answer questions during their unemployment debate on 8 December. Dr Paisley suggested that Lord Gowrie might also make a statement on prison segregation. The Speaker recognised the importance of making early progress on the 2 Orders which had been tabled, the one on consumer councils and the one on rates. He proposed to arrange for a short debate on each on 14 December. It was recognised, particularly by Dr Paisley, that the establishment of the departmental committees would considerably increase the effectiveness of the Assembly. They, rather than the Assembly itself, would normally consider the large number of motions which had been tabled. It would be preferable for Ministers to make statements

to the Assembly after the committees had considered an issue and themselves reported to the Assembly. Until committees had got underway, however, Ministers might perhaps usefully make statements to the Assembly on their departmental allocations under the 1982 PSC survey, which would be announced shortly. That would provide an opportunity for members to put wide-ranging questions on departmental responsibilities. These sessions were likely to be more useful if Assembly members informally notified the Speaker's office in advance of the questions they wished to put so that these could be passed on to the Department and the relevant Minister briefed accordingly.

The Secretary of State, concluding the meeting, reaffirmed his wish to help the Assembly and its members in any way he could. He considered the proposals he had made were likely to be the best way forward without raising awkward constitutional questions or insuperable practical difficulties. He was grateful for the sympathetic way they had been received by the Assembly leaders. He doubted if it would be appropriate for Lord Gowrie to speak at the adjournment debate on prisons, but he undertook to consider carefully with Mr Butler whether it would be possible for Mr Butler to make a statement during the Assembly's debate on unemployment. His office would be in touch with the Speaker's office on this as soon as possible. He noted Assembly members wishes to raise constituency questions with Ministers. This raised a constitutional problem affecting the responsibility of Westminster MPs; and he would normally expect his colleagues to write to Assembly members on such matters; but if Members noted by the Speaker's office informed him of their intention to raise such a matter during a Ministerial statement, it might be possible for the Minister to respond; if not, he would still have to write. These constitutional problems underlined the importance of developing Assembly procedures slowly taking full account of Ministers' responsibilities to Westminster, and the need to develop a practical structure in which Ministers and their advisors could be of most help to Assembly members. Another difficulty, which Dr Paisley had referred to, was the use of the Speaker's house. The Government had a legal right to use Stormont House, and required it and its Annex to carry out its Executive responsibilities. But he had noted the Assembly's views and would take them into account. He had also noted that the Assembly leaders did not wish that day to discuss the provisions of standing order 6(5) requiring Assembly members to sign the roll within 6 months.

He noted that the Speaker would be writing to him about this shortly and would be seeking a meeting in due course. The Secretary of State thanked the Assembly leaders for their co-operation and undertook to do everything he could to ensure that the procedures for questioning Ministers which he had outlined worked as smoothly as possible.

Mail Copy

for JOHN LYON
Private Secretary

7 December 1982

cc: PS/SOS (~~B~~ & ~~Z~~)
PS/Ministers (~~B~~ & ~~Z~~)
PS/PUS (~~B~~ & ~~Z~~)
PS/Sir Ewart Bell
Mr Brennan
Mr Boun
Mr Merifield
Mr Angel
Miss Davies
Mr Gilliland
Mr Abbott
Mr Blatherwick
Miss Owens
Mr Sullivan