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NOTE OF MEETING BETWEEN SDLP AND MEMBERS OF THE GOVERNMENT

A meeting was held in Iveagh House on 22 April, 1974, between Messrs. Fitt and Devlin of the SDLP and those members of the Government who were present at Sunningdale who were available at the time. The Ministers present were the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, the Minister for Posts and Telegraphs and the Minister for Justice: the Attorney General was also present. The following is a summary of the main points to emerge from the meeting.

Messrs. Fitt and Devlin did not come with specific instructions from their Party. In a number of respects, they held opposed opinions and in general it was clear that they had not settled on any joint line of approach for the meeting. At one stage, Mr. Devlin made it clear that they were both expressing personal opinions and had no Party line on this matter. Accordingly, the discussion was quite inconclusive and it was agreed at the end of the meeting that the SDLP should go back to their own Party, and come back with a firmer line, following which a joint attempt would be made to settle on a suitable timetable for ratification and implementation of Sunningdale.

To a considerable extent, Mr. Fitt seemed to act as an advocate for Mr. Faulkner. He adopted a basically optimistic attitude. He expressed the view that the Executive would hang together and placed considerable stress on the support given by Mr. Wilson's firm line and by the results of the opinion poll published last week. On the Council of Ireland, he expressed the view that Mr. Faulkner could carry his Party with him, so long as we proceeded gradually: he could not sell the whole Sunningdale package at present. He was at pains to stress Mr. Faulkner's difficulties and, in general, seemed to have considerable sympathy for Mr. Faulkner's approach at this stage.

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Mr. Devlin, on the other hand, adopted a much more pessimistic attitude. He said that Mr. Roy Bradford was having discussions with members of the Loyalist Coalition, including Laird, Taylor and Harry West. Bradford seemed to be working towards an expansion of the Executive to embrace the Official Unionist Party, apparently with a view to becoming leader of a reunited party and Chief Minister of the Executive. Bradford, and also Faulkner, seemed to think that the SDLP would accept a watering down of Sunningdale. In particular, Bradford seemed to think that the SDLP would accept him as Chief Minister in a power sharing Executive. This was not so: the SDLP, as a Party, was pressing for full ratification. Moreover, they had some understanding with Faulkner but would never know where they stood with Bradford.

Mr. Devlin stressed that he personally and all members of his Party were under great pressure from their electorate, arising from the recent increase in internment. They had entered the Executive, on condition that there could be progress in respect of 3 things - policing, internment and the Council of Ireland. In respect of all of these, they were now faced with retreat rather than advance. Unless there are large-scale releases of internees he was thinking strongly of resigning on the 20th May.

Both Mr. Fitt and Mr. Devlin stated that they favoured early ratification of Sunningdale but with staged implementation. They mentioned that they had put this idea to Mr. Merlyn Rees at a meeting last week. Mr. Devlin did not express any clear view on what the possible stages might be. Mr. Fitt, however, read a letter to him from Mr. Faulkner (copy attached) which set out proposals broadly similar to those already conveyed in Mr. Faulkner's letters of 31 March and 3 April to the Taoiseach i.e. a Council of Ireland without Executive functions initially, but responsible for the policing and human rights aspects, as agreed at Sunningdale and for a review of a series of