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NOTE OF A MEETING IN MR BLOOMFIELD'S ROOM ON 11 JUNE TO DISCUSS THE
IMPLICATIONS OF THE POSSIBLE DISSOLUTION OF THE NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY

Present : Mr K P Bloomfield
Mr A W Stephens
Dr W G H Quigley
Mr D Barry
Mr J Sullivan

1. Mr Bloomfield said that if Cabinet agreed, the Secretary of State would make a statement in the Commons on 12 June to say that Parliament would shortly be invited to approve an Order to dissolve the Assembly. This was likely to be debated on 19 June and made at a Privy Council meeting on 23 June, to come into effect at midnight that day. The date of dissolution would not be made public until after the Order had been made at Privy Council, although it was possible MP's might press for this information when the Order is debated. The Secretary of State might wish to give the Speaker some prior warning but this could pose problems.
2. There was a discussion on the relative merits of dissolution on a Monday or on a Friday. Mr Barry said that the Assembly was likely to be in session on the day of dissolution and it would not be easy to contain protest action within the ground and first floors. This could be triggered by the debate on 19 June. DOE had earlier been in favour of a Friday dissolution as it would be easier to deal with protests at a weekend when the building was free of civil servants. It was likely that the DUP would be reluctant to engage in protest action on a Sunday, although they might be prepared to sit in and hold services. A Friday sit-in could however lead to major public protests in the Estate on the Saturday and it might be easier to deal with such protests on a working day. It was agreed that while the reluctance of the DUP to engage in protests on a Sunday tended to favour a Friday dissolution, there were also arguments the other way and we should therefore not press the case against a Monday dissolution.

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3. It was agreed that any protest action should not be allowed to continue indefinitely and that the RUC would need advice on when to intervene. If protests could be contained within the Assembly's precincts there was much to be said for acting quickly, after due warning and if possible before civil servants arrived for work. It was also agreed that Assembly members should be allowed to return to the building to clear their rooms but that this should be done on an individual basis by appointment with the Clerk. Mr Barry said that DOE would be concentrating on the position at Parliament Buildings and the security of other buildings and access to the estate would also need to be considered.
4. Mr Bloomfield said that we needed to be absolutely clear on the position of the Clerk and what his powers were after dissolution; would he for example remain responsible for access to and discipline in the Assembly's precincts? It was also unclear how dissolution would affect these precincts and he had therefore asked NIO(L) for urgent legal advice on these matters. It would be crucial to know who was in charge of 'policing' after dissolution. DFP would also need to examine its responsibilities in relation to the designation of the precincts and to consider how long the Clerk should continue as Accounting Officer of the Assembly. He would be seeing the Clerk later in the day to give him advance warning of the Secretary of State's statement and to suggest a line to take with Assembly staff.
5. The Secretary of State's statement will make it clear that devolution remains the Government's objective and that elections to the Assembly were possible later on. It was possible therefore that he might prefer to keep the Clerk in post, even if there was little work for a Clerk. Dr Quigley said that the Clerk's position was tricky as under an arrangement agreed with him earlier, he had no right of return to the civil service. He suggested that the Clerk should be asked how he saw his own future as he may have his own ideas and that we should explore the conditions under which he might be retained. DFP would check on his status before the present Assembly was set up and Mr Barry suggested that DOE might be able to use his services in a review of public health legislation.

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6. It was agreed that NICS staff seconded to the Assembly should be assured that its dissolution would not adversely affect their careers and that they should be returned to their Departments as quickly as possible. It would not be possible to keep the specialist typists together as a group but they would be returned to their Departments on the clear understanding that they could be recalled if necessary. DFP would have a large number of staff to absorb (eg messengers) and would be looking for the assistance of other Departments. It was accepted that the Clerk might need to retain some staff for a time (for example to edit the bound volumes of debates) but the aim should be to return as quickly as possible to the situation which existed before the present Assembly was set up ie a titular Clerk without major functions and with few staff.
7. It was agreed that the organisers should be advised to postpone the mid-summer ball, due to be held on 20 June, as this could be a focus for protest action. Mr Bloomfield will speak to the organisers after the Secretary of State's statement.
8. Mr Barry said that we would need to consider the future of the Assembly dining room. It had proved expensive to keep it on after the end of the previous Assembly and it should be closed down.


J G SULLIVAN

12 June 1986

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