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Reference Code: 2021/100/16

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AN RÚNAÍOCHT ANGLA-ÉIREANNACH
BÉAL FEIRSTE

ANGLO-IRISH SECRETARIAT
BELFAST

4/3 (7/9)
cc to the Secretary, on 14/9/98
to the Public
Robert W + 2
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Secure Fax: 1070

Date: 14 September 1998

No. Of pages (including cover): 4

234

To: Secretary Gallagher

Taoiseach

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From: Gerard Keown

hull

21.9.98

Subject: Meeting of the NI Assembly

1. The NI Assembly reconvened today after the summer recess, and held its first meeting in the newly renovated debating chamber at Parliament Buildings. Those members absent on 1 July signed the members' roll, after which a number of procedural and practical motions were debated. An adjournment debate on the Omagh bombing was carried over until tomorrow. Lord Alderdice continued as Presiding Officer, and the election of a permanent speaker did not feature on the order of business.

2. Lord Dubs sat in the visitor's box during the morning session, his presence apparently prompted by that of Lord Cope who is expected to lead for the Tories when the NI Settlement Bill moves to the Lords. Although offered a place in the 'diplomatic box', I took my seat in the public gallery.

3. Main Points:

- The three independent unionist members have come together to form a new grouping in the Assembly, the United Unionist Assembly Party, under the leadership of Denis Watson. The UUAP will qualify for full party privileges in the Assembly (including a seat on all committees) from 21 September;

- Two committees were established: a shadow commission to oversee practical matters such as staffing, control of buildings, and an ad hoc committee to examine the procedural consequences of devolution, in particular, relations between the Assembly and Westminster. It is to report by 6 October;
 - After a lengthy discussion of the present right of members to change their designation (Nationalist/Unionist/Other), and Alliance and NIWC criticism of the designation 'Other', an interim report on standing orders was approved. A full report is to be tabled by 26 October;
 - After a 3 hour debate, and heavy criticism from the DUP and UKUP, the report submitted by the First and Deputy First Ministers on, *inter alia*, departmental reorganisation, establishment of the Executive, the first meeting of the North-South Ministerial Council, and the Civic Forum was adopted by the Assembly.
4. Discussion of standing orders centred on the existing right of members to alter their designation. For varying reasons, Alliance, DUP and UKUP sought to reduce this entitlement to once during a session. DUP and UKUP speakers described as undemocratic the NIWC's stated intention to change its designation as and when necessary to 'protect the agreement,' McCartney arguing that such a provision undermined the basis of cross-community voting. The potential implication of this for the outworking of the d'Hondt allocation of Ministerial portfolios and Committee chairs was noted. Alliance and NIWC also argued for a change to the designation 'Other', though this met with little sympathy.
5. The DUP stressed the new United Unionists' entitlement, under existing standing orders, to a place on all committees. Noting that the maximum number of places ~~on~~ had already been allocated, it proposed that Sinn Féin lose one of its members on the grounds of proportionality. It was agreed that, although the UUAP had such a right, it would be for the standing orders committee to decide whether to increase the number of seats per committee, or alter the basis on which they were allocated.
6. Introducing his and Mallon's joint report, David Trimble laid out a timetable for the coming months. After proposing a review of government and expenditure in

NI, Trimble envisaged agreement on the number of Departments and portfolios by the end of November. After this implementation, by way of an Order in Council, could take up to three months. The inaugural meeting of the North-South Ministerial Council would take place in early October, at which point agreement might be reached on a number of implementation bodies. He summed up by warning that the formation of the Executive, and Sinn Féin's place on it, was linked to the need for there to be some form of decommissioning first.

7. In a less specific intervention, Mallon said the NSMC and implementation bodies had to be meaningful (not 'ivory towers') and stressed the need for a common programme of work across all Departments. Empey warned of the costs involved in creating new Departments, and cautioned against introducing a new tier of government, suggesting Ministers might be appointed without separate Departments. Nesbitt stressed the need for government structure to follow from policy, rather than the reverse, and proposed an initial Executive of seven Departments which might be reviewed at a later stage. This was a proposal that was also advanced by Peter Robinson. The DUP also argued that the Assembly should be able to amend proposals for departmental reorganisation when they are eventually tabled.
8. McCartney and the DUP singled out David Trimble for particular criticism, stating that there was no basis in the Agreement for the exclusion of Sinn Féin from Ministerial office once the Executive was established under the d'Hondt system. McCartney also stated that to proceed to a meeting of the NSMC before the Executive was in place went against the letter and spirit of the Agreement, and accused Trimble of determining upon this sequence of events because of difficulties he faced within the UUP.
9. In low key interventions, Sinn Féin urged the speedy appointment of the Executive, pointing to the involvement of 'relevant Ministers' as part of the process of achieving agreement on the implementation bodies by 31 October. It also stressed the importance of cross-cutting issues such as equality. The PUP, Alliance and NIWC also argued for the maximum number of ten Departments.
10. In addition to the above points, Sinn Féin signalled its intention to revisit the question of the Assembly's permanent location and the provision of translation facilities for those who wished to speak in Irish. The UUP and DUP raised the

question of whether the Union flag would be flown from Parliament Buildings.

11. The Assembly adjourned at 18.00, and will resume tomorrow for a three hour debate on the Omagh bombing. There is no further business to be conducted this week.