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cc B/JP

Prime Minister

B.07448

CDP  
B/6.

PRIME MINISTER

c Sir Robert Armstrong

Northern Ireland Assembly:  
OD Meeting at 10.30 on Monday 9 June

CONCLUSION

The Committee should reach a view on whether to dissolve the Northern Ireland Assembly, and when. That conclusion should be put to Cabinet on 12 June, probably on the basis of a memorandum by the Northern Ireland Secretary for the benefit of Cabinet Ministers who are not members of OD.

BACKGROUND

2. The meeting will consider a memorandum (OD(86)9) of 6 June by the Northern Ireland Secretary. All members of the Committee will attend, except the Lord President, who has given his views in a minute of 6 June. The Home Secretary, the Solicitor General and the Chief Whip will also attend.

HANDLING

- 3. The following aspects require discussion -
  - a. Whether to dissolve the Assembly. The Northern Ireland Secretary sees two reasons for doing so: elections this autumn would be disruptive and would stimulate the unionist campaign against the Anglo-Irish Agreement; and the Assembly's performance for many months has been shameful. He thinks that dissolution is widely considered in Northern Ireland to be necessary, even overdue.



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b. Timing. Best to get the matter through Parliament before the marching season gets going in early July. Should dissolution take effect then, or later, e.g. 19 October when the present Assembly would normally end? The Northern Ireland Secretary strongly favours early dissolution, since the Assembly would continue to make mischief until actually dissolved.

c. Presentation. These points should be stressed:

- the Government remain fully committed to the Anglo-Irish Agreement;
- the Government's continued commitment to devolution and readiness to call a round table conference;
- this is dissolution of the Assembly not abolition; the Government's willingness to call new Assembly elections, perhaps on an improved basis;
- the Government's offer to talk to unionist leaders about the future of the Assembly as well as other matters (your meeting with Messrs Molyneux and Paisley on 25 February) still stands;
- the Northern Ireland Secretary will consult the constitutional parties about the Government business which the Assembly would normally scrutinise.

d. Preparing the ground for an announcement.

- the Northern Ireland Secretary should secure, before any announcement, the clearest possible



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public commitment from the SDLP to participate in future elections to the Assembly;

- he will also be encouraging Church leaders in their support for dialogue between the political parties and the Government;
- there is a need, not mentioned in the memorandum, to explain the decision in advance to key MPs. (Sir John Biggs-Davison, Sir Humphrey Atkins and Sir William van Straubenzee, Messrs J Prior, M Rees, R Mason, D Howell and W Benyon were mentioned at your meeting on 5 June. Should Mr Gow be added?)

e. "Council of Northern Ireland". Not mentioned in the Northern Ireland Secretary's memorandum. Would a new Council of Northern Ireland with advisory powers, an idea which could be launched before the marching season and implemented in the autumn, provide a focus for politics and a safety valve for unionist opinion? The Lord President favours this.

C L G Mallaby

6 June 1986