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TO FCO SAVING TEL NO: 27 OF 2 DECEMBER 1982

FOR INFO NIO (LONDON) AND NIO (BELFAST)

MR PRIOR'S VISIT TO THE UNITED STATES

1. Following is the record, agreed with PS/Mr Prior, of Mr Prior's meeting in Washington with the Deputy Secretary of State, Mr Kenneth Dam, at 1700 hours on 16 November: _____

Present:

The Hon Kenneth Dam (Deputy
Secretary of State)

The Rt Hon James Prior MP

Sir Oliver Wright (HM Ambassador)

Mr Richard Burt (Assistant
Secretary of State for
European Affairs)

Mr David Gilliland (Director

of Information,

Mr Keith Smith, Northern

Northern Ireland Office)

European Bureau, State

Mr John Lyon, Principal

Department

Private Secretary to

Mr Steven Geis, Northern

Mr Prior

European Bureau, State

Mr J S Wall, HM Embassy

Department

Mr Dam said that he had spent a lot of time in Britain, particularly when he was researching a book, since published, about the development of North Sea oil licensing. His only acquaintance with Ireland was with Shannon airport. He had read about Northern Ireland and had of course been briefed in the State Department. He wished he understood it better.

Mr Prior said that he thought that the British Government had been right to take its initiative on establishing the Assembly, although there were still certain difficulties. But it was not by any means proved that it could not be made to work

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Certain difficulties had to be overcome notably getting the minority community to play a part. With a little more help from the south, it was possible that the SDLP might have tried to make things work. It would now take a while before they could be wooed. It was pointless to try just at present. It was ^a hopeful sign that the Unionists had not wrecked the Assembly (although some of them had initially tried but ^{they} had been thwarted by others who were determined to give things a try). The members of the Assembly had now got their feet under the table. They could not of course have real power transferred to them until the SDLP were also present and until agreement could be reached which would command widespread support throughout the Northern Ireland community.

2. Mr Dam asked whether this meant that things were now in a holding pattern and whether this could be sustained. Mr Prior replied that there was something of a holding pattern at present but such patterns never lasted long in Northern Ireland. Much would depend on whether the newer generation of members of the Official Unionist Party saw it as in their long term interests to make concessions which would enable the SDLP to play their part and whether the SDLP could avoid looking over their shoulder to the greener elements within their own party. A lot would also depend upon Anglo-Irish relations. The difficulty was to make progress which would bring the SDLP in but without driving the Unionists out.

3. Mr Burt asked what kind of dialogue Mr Prior was

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currently having with the SDLP. During his own recent discussions with the Irish, the Irish Government had suggested that there might be ^{an} advantage in a rather more informal set of talks with the SDLP. Mr Prior replied that he had seen the SDLP ~~the~~ ^{the} previous week. He had expressed disappointment at their decision not to take their seats in the Assembly. ^{They were} /elected representatives and would be treated as such with access to Ministers, etc.. He had suggested that the SDLP might appoint people to shadow the Committees in the Assembly and to feed in their views, ie. to try to establish a pattern of cooperation even though the SDLP had not taken their seats. There was no point in trying to isolate the SDLP. The Government would try to cooperate with them. But it would be damaging to think that there was some easy way of persuading the SDLP to take their seats and matters would have to rest for a bit. It was somewhat encouraging that the Unionist members of the Assembly had, almost as their first act, sent a message to the SDLP elected members asking ^{them} /to take their seats.

4. Mr Burt commented that the success of Provisional Sinn Fein in taking 10% of the votes in the recent Assembly elections was a disturbing phenomenon. Mr Prior said that Provisional Sinn Fein had won more seats than had been expected, ^{but} /even in ^{the} 1981 local elections, which were not in themselves particularly significant, they had obtained 7% of the vote.

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5. Mr Dam asked what effect the general election in the Republic of Ireland was likely to have on Anglo-Irish relations. Mr Prior commented that almost the only plank in Mr Haughey's election platform was to accuse Garret Fitzgerald of being a 'Brit lover'. This might compel Dr Fitzgerald to take a harder line towards Britain than he would wish in order to live down that image. Whatever the outcome of the Irish election therefore things would not be easy. It was certainly true that Mr Haughey had made his life very difficult. When the British Government was preparing its new policy in January/February the Republic were holding elections and paid virtually no attention to what was going on. Mr Prior himself had had to get on with his plans because of the Parliamentary ^{and} timetable, because the closer things got to a British general election the more difficult it would be to make progress. What he had not appreciated was what turned out to be the enormous difference between Dr Fitzgerald and Mr Haughey. Garret Fitzgerald had been in favour of an Assembly whereas Mr Haughey had been totally opposed to it. Mr Burt asked about the so-called Irish dimension. Mr Prior said that it was possible to have an Irish dimension but it would take some time. Conspiracy theories abounded among the Unionists and one unhelpful outcome of the recent NORAID trial was that it would confirm Enoch Powell and others in their view that the US in general, and the CIA in particular, were part of a conspiracy to undermine the Unionist position.

6. Mr Dam asked how stable things would be if policy was

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a matter of maintaining the status quo. Mr Prior replied that we had a better grip of the security situation than for some years. ^{The} presence of the army had been lessened. Our information on what was going on was much better than before. Until the sectarian killings following the Assembly elections, 1982 had been the best year in security terms since the troubles began. Things could turn very nasty if these assassinations were extended eg to members of the Assembly /in 1981, during the hunger strikes, the ^{community in} majority Northern Ireland had come close to boiling over but had not actually done so.

7. Mr Burt asked how long the British Government could keep the Assembly going if the SDLP did not take their seats. Mr Prior said that he thought that the Assembly would carry on beyond the date of the next general election in Great Britain. The Unionists would wish to keep things going in the hope either of a large Conservative majority which would encourage them to ask for straight forward majority rule (not that there was any remote possibility that they would get it) or in the hope that there would be a hung Parliament in which they could play one side off against the other. For their part, the SDLP might hope either to see a Labour Government or a hung Parliament following the next general election in the hope that things might swing more to their point of view.

8. Mr Prior said that the hardest question which he had had to answer during the Parliamentary debate on

his proposals was whether what he had put forward gave both communities in Northern Ireland the ability to prevent progress. The answer was that his proposals did give both sides that blocking power, but this was inevitable.

9. Mr Dam said that the US wished to see reconciliation.

It also hoped to see better Anglo-Irish relations at Governmental level. For its part, the US would continue rigorously to enforce the statutes and regulations governing the export of arms.

He agreed ^{that} Mr Prior could refer publicly to this undertaking.

10. Mr Prior said that ^{the more} the US could do behind the scenes to get those who had been democratically elected to the new Assembly to play their part the better. They could lose so much by not taking part while progress could be made if they did so. Mr Burt commented that it was sometimes better to stay quiet than to speak up. However, during his recent talks with the Irish Government, he had told them that they should give Mr Prior's plan a chance to work. In other words, the US had been very supportive in private. Mr Prior said that, for his part, he would do all he could to try to get relations with Dublin on a better footing. He had already made it clear publicly that the British Government would not go back on agreements already reached. We had however lost ground over Mr Haughey's determination to knock Britain around during the Falklands dispute. Mr Prior described ^{how} his attempts to arrange a meeting with Mr Haughey in the summer had come to nothing. It remained the case that he could not really make progress unless Anglo-Irish relations were on an even keel. ~~///~~ The meeting ended at 1745 hours. WRIGHT

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