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From: Angus Lapsley
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John Holmes ✓

*See minute to HoPm of 20/1
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MARCHES

Sir Patrick Mayhew telephoned the Prime Minister last night. They spoke for about 15 mins.

Sir Patrick said that he had received the draft North report into marches in Northern Ireland. It would be published on Thursday 30 January. The Government needed to think how to respond quickly.

The Prime Minister asked whether it was possible to delay the report's publication until Friday 31 January. This would reduce the risk of being pinned down at PMQs. Sir Patrick thought that this would not be a problem, but it could not be delayed much longer than that.

Sir Patrick explained that the report's main recommendation was the creation of an independent commission, aimed at encouraging local resolution of disputes about marches and bringing more transparency into the decision making process. The Commission would have the power to determine whether marches went ahead, although the Chief Constable would still be able to ask the Secretary of State to reconsider the decision and would also have a final right to overrule the commission on operational grounds. The report was not overly critical of the Government or the RUC's roles in last year's marches, although there was some implicit criticism of the lack of long term planning.

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Overall Sir Patrick found the report very well written and personally thought that it would be impossible to reject its central recommendation. It was right. The Nationalists and Labour would welcome it, but the Ulster Unionists would not. They would see it as curtailing their traditional freedom to march.

The main handling question was whether to enact the recommendations in time for this year's marching season. This implied acting before the election. The alternative was to consult on the recommendations and postpone serious debate until after the election. This would probably mean that the provisions were not in place until next year's season. Sir Patrick thought that it would be difficult to justify passing over the opportunity to get something in place for this season. This would not please the Unionists, but it was they who had effectively initiated civil war in the province last summer.

The Prime Minister said that he agreed.

Sir Patrick said that he wanted to consult either Tony Blair or Mo Mowlam before the report was published and did not think that he could avoid talking to David Trimble. The Prime Minister agreed.

Sir Patrick felt that "NI" (the select committee?) would be divided on the issue, but as they had backed setting up the North report, they would probably go along with the recommendations. The Prime Minister agreed. It would not be the first time that NI had, at the end of the day, gone along with the Government. Sir Patrick's inclination was to enact the new provisions on the Floor of the House, rather than through orders. He did not doubt that the Government would get it through, since all sides would want as little blood on the floor as possible. Sir Patrick ended by saying that he would no doubt talk with the Prime Minister later in the week.

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Angus.