

There might be merit in taking forward that section of the Prime Minister's Party Conference Speech dealing with the need to improve democratic accountability in Northern Ireland.

1. Although the Northern Ireland (Grand) Committee has functioned since Wilson's time - the Prime Minister stressed the need for an increase in its powers and scope. I understand that Business Managers are in agreement but the proposals are being obstructed by the habit of the Northern Ireland Office of refusing to act without the unanimous and positive approval of all Parties in Northern Ireland. I cannot imagine that to be the practice of the Scottish Office in regard to proposals for Scotland.
2. A Northern Ireland Economic Committee established by resolution of both Houses, consisting of MPs and Peers to give weight to the endeavours of the Northern Ireland Department of Economic Affairs and the Industrial Development Board particularly in Trade Missions visiting foreign investors in their own locations. The idea did attract the interest of Baroness Denton who feels the body would raise the profile of industrial development in Northern Ireland. The proposal has been stalled by the usual granting of a veto to one Northern Ireland party which objected on the irrelevant grounds that it would not enhance the possibility of a united Ireland!
3. Major changes in local government in Northern Ireland with the object of returning real powers to District Councils remains a necessary step but it is evident that Parliamentary time may not be available to promote even the modest legislation required. However, given that the DOE (NI) in 1996 devolved its powers to unaccountable agencies to deal with matters like Roads and Planning, it ought to be possible to greatly enhance those agencies by adding a democratic element in the form of elected District Councillors. For example, as agencies might each cover four Council areas, it would be quite simple to invite each Council to nominate two of its members to serve on a Planning Committee/Council/Board, which would have the advice of expert planning agency officers. This would protect all four Councils from local pressure to grant all planning applications - even those which offended against good planning practice.

Much the same considerations would apply to existing Roads agencies in decision making on vital matters like Road improvement, maintenance and safety.