



(See letter  
out of 17/1x)

File John 14/1x -

Prime Minister

Prime Minister

September 1996

Are you content with this? Or are you hoping to announce this in some more high profile way, eg at the TPC? John 27/19.

THE NORTHERN IRELAND GRAND COMMITTEE AND RELATED ISSUES

You will know that we have been examining the possibility of developing the role and remit of the Northern Ireland Grand Committee.

2. My purpose in writing to you now is to seek confirmation that you are content that I take this forward by writing to the Northern Ireland parties along the lines of the proposals that we have previously agreed with yourself and Cabinet colleagues. A summary of our proposals is attached to this letter.

3. The alternative is to prepare a suitable line for use when this matter is next raised (as it almost inevitably will be) at either the next meeting of the Grand Committee on 15 October (to discuss the Reports of the Examiner of Statutory Rules) or on the Floor of the House. I attach a draft line for use in those circumstances but my own preference would be to go for pre-emptive action now as this might prevent unionist politicians raising this issue again with a sense of grievance when the House reconvenes.

4. I am copying this letter to Tony Newton.

Ax

PATRICK MAYHEW



PROPOSALS FOR POSSIBLE CHANGES TO THE NORTHERN IRELAND GRAND COMMITTEE

- i) Northern Ireland Office Ministers might make a PES statement to the Grand Committee in place of the present briefing arrangements;
- ii) Northern Ireland Ministers might make statements and take questions in Committee on a regular basis;
- iii) other members of Cabinet and other Departmental Ministers whose responsibilities extend to Northern Ireland might make statements and take questions before the Committee;
- iv) some Grand committee meetings might be held in a Northern Ireland venue;
- v) greater use might be made of the existing power to hold both general debates and those intended to consider Proposals for draft Orders in Council; and
- vi) additional powers might be provided for the Committee to take evidence on draft legislation.

For the moment, these changes will only involve those Ministers in the House of Commons (as they do for the Scottish and Welsh Office).

If any of these changes are adopted (especially iv), there will be consequences for House business, particularly in arranging the attendance of the 25 "other" members of the Committee from GB constituencies.



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**POSSIBLE DEFENSIVE LINE FOR USE IN RESPONSE TO QUERIES ABOUT THE  
FUTURE OF THE NORTHERN IRELAND GRAND COMMITTEE**

I know that my Rt Hon Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is seeking an opportune moment to discuss possible developments in the role and remit of the Northern Ireland Grand Committee with the Northern Ireland parties. The Government sees such developments as a way of making Government more accountable to elected representatives of the people of Northern Ireland while the political talks continue to seek a way forward in the longer term. Development of the Grand Committee, as an interim measure, could offer Northern Ireland MPs and their constituents greater opportunities to scrutinise Government policies.

I enclose a paper which has now been agreed between us: it is presented as a draft statement of the conclusions which plenary might be invited to reach as the outcome of the "address" to decommissioning.

We have worked very hard with the Irish to achieve agreement on this and there does not seem to be any further room for manoeuvre. It goes as far as we believe is possible to meet your stated concerns while remaining consistent with the two Governments' policy positions.

I want to ask you to weigh the paper very carefully before reaching any conclusion on it. I look forward to discussing it with you tomorrow. I hope you will ask any questions at the next Whitehall planned for Monday.

I recognise that this paper will raise difficult issues for you, requiring most careful consideration. I am ready to do my best to protect the case for moving forward on this basis to plenary in the most positive and cooperative manner. I would make clear that, in