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20 December 1996

THE NORTHERN IRELAND GRAND COMMITTEE (NIGC)

With the agreement of Cabinet colleagues I wrote to leaders of the main Northern Ireland and Opposition parties on 23 October with a list of proposals in respect of this Committee.

So far I have received substantive replies from the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and Bob McCartney of the United Kingdom Unionist Party (UKUP). The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) have requested a meeting to discuss the issue but have given us no indication of their concerns. Copies of all three responses are attached along with a detailed summary. As you will see, the two substantive replies indicate that there are areas of agreement in respect of statements, oral questions from Northern Ireland Office and other Departmental Ministers, and on holding some meetings in Northern Ireland.

The UUP and UKUP also raise the possibility of changes in the membership of the Committee and make additional proposals about the handling of Northern Ireland legislation.

The first of these suggestions would bring Northern Ireland into line with the Scottish and Welsh Committees but I am

not inclined to pursue this idea. When our predecessors discussed the membership issue in October 1992 it seems they believed that the addition of "other members" would, with the help of the Opposition, not only give an element of control over a Committee with no Government majority and a potential to be hostile, but also meet the need to cater for the wide interest that there always is in NI affairs. I am therefore not convinced that it is appropriate to attempt to change the membership of this Committee.

I have considered the proposals put forward by the two parties in respect of legislation but believe that they hold little merit and would have far-reaching consequences for House business. They also go beyond the current provisions for the Scottish and Welsh Grand Committees which, I imagine, would cause concern for Michael Forsyth and William Hague.

In any event, the UUP proposals for handling legislation would be inconsistent with the Government's political development strategy for Northern Ireland. They would also represent a solid political gain for unionists and so be bitterly opposed by nationalists. Even if this were not the case, their ideas would prejudice my ability to ensure that legislation for Northern Ireland reflects Government policy, as we would not then have a majority on the Committee.

I intend to take this matter forward by:-

(i) writing to those recipients of my letter of 23 October who have not responded in order to remind them that I await their comments;

(ii) writing to Mr Trimble and Mr McCartney explaining that I cannot make substantive comments on their letters until I have had responses from all the relevant parties; and

(iii) seeking the agreement of colleagues to confining the consultation and discussion on all of this to our original agreed list and resisting any suggestions in relation to membership or legislation.

I am, of course, happy to meet colleagues to discuss any of these points and will not in any case make a substantive reply to any of the parties until we have an agreed line.

I am copying this letter to the Prime Minister, the Chief Whip, the Home Secretary, the Secretaries of State for Scotland and for Wales and to the Lord Privy Seal.