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S OF S PRIVATE OFFICE 1712106722

No. 3820 P. 4/9

DRAFT LETTER FOR SIGNATURE BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE

David Trimble Esq MP (UUP)
Dr Marjorie Mowlam MP (Labour)
The Rt Hon Paddy Ashdown MP (Lib Dem)
Robert McCartney Esq QC MP (UKUP)
The Rev Ian R K Paisley MP MEP (DUP)
Lord Alderdice (Alliance)
Lord Morris of Castle Morris (Labour Spokesman in the Lords)
Lord Holme of Cheltenham CBE (Lib Dem Spokesman in Lords)
Lord Prys-Davies (Labour Spokesman)

I am writing to let you know the outcome of the consultations on the role and remit of the Northern Ireland Grand Committee (NIGC) that began with my letter of 23 October 1996.

The Government intends to move ahead on the five proposals listed in my original letter, viz:

- (i) NIO Ministers should make the PES statement to the Grand Committee in place of the present briefing arrangements;
- (ii) NIO Ministers should 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 should be able to make statements and take questions before the Committee;
- (iv) some Grand Committee meetings should be held in a Northern Ireland venue;
- (v) greater use should be made of the existing power to hold both general debates and debates to consider Proposals for Draft Orders in Council.

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Under item (ii) I should say that Lords Ministers would be able to address the Northern Ireland Grand Committee in the same way as they can its Scottish and Welsh counterparts.

In the light of representations made during the consultation, the Government intends to recommend three further changes:

- (i) the Northern Ireland Grand Committee should be able on a Government motion to consider certain Bills relating exclusively to Northern Ireland, in the equivalent of second and third reading debates;
- (ii) it should also be possible, on a Government motion, for draft Northern Ireland Orders and Orders in Council to be referred to the NIGC instead of to a Standing Committee or being taken on the floor of the House;
- (iii) there should be provision for half-hour adjournment debates at the end of NIGC meetings.

That would bring the Northern Ireland Grand Committee on to all fours with the Scottish Grand Committee in respect of the handling of relevant legislation. I shall not be recommending any changes to the membership of the NIGC (although the quorum will be reduced to 7) or proposing a set number of meetings.

A motion to amend Standing Orders reflecting these proposals will be brought before the House shortly. I believe that these changes will prove valuable in improving the role of the Grand Committee during direct rule by providing an arena in which the policies of the Government, in respect of Northern Ireland, can be given detailed analysis by Northern Ireland MPs and in which they can take a more active role in the governance of Northern Ireland.

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As I said in my original letter, we see these changes as being entirely without prejudice to any developments there may be in the multi-party negotiations about the future relationship between any new political institutions in Northern Ireland and the Westminster Parliament. And of course, in the event of any devolution to local representatives there will be a consequential diminution in the role of the NIGC.

I am writing in similar terms to the leaders of all the Northern Ireland parties represented at Westminster and to the Opposition spokesmen in both Houses.

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