

From: THE PRIVATE SECRETARY



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John Holmes Esq
Private Secretary to the Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
LONDON

10 September 1997

Dear John,

CONFIDENCE MEASURES FOR UNIONISTS: FIREARMS CONTROLS

Following today's meeting between David Trimble and the Prime Minister, you asked my Minister for a note setting out the proposals we have in mind for reforming the firearms legislation in Northern Ireland and our intentions with regard to personal protection weapons. These proposals have not yet been released into the public domain but would form the basis of a Consultation Paper (to be accompanied by an arranged PQ) to be issued sometime after Parliament resumes next month on a date to be agreed. Because of the complexities, it is likely the period of consultation would extend beyond the normal six weeks period. Needless to say, all the political parties in Northern Ireland, the Irish and the wider shooting community would be given an opportunity to comment.

Our principle legislative reforms would include:

- (i) tightening-up the definition of "firearm" and permitting deactivated firearms subject to specified controls;
- (ii) removing the grant of full firearms certificates to non-UK residents and replacing these with a system of Visitors' certificates renewable annually;
- (iii) reordering the legal criteria for grant of a certificate to give primacy to public safety considerations;
- (iv) extending the grounds of "intemperate habits" for refusing a certificate to include drugs and solvent abuse;
- (v) extending the grant of firearms certificates from three to five years;
- (vi) replacing the system of certificate renewals with the more rigorous re-grants system;
- (vii) permit the legal borrowing of shotguns and airguns in specified circumstances;



- (viii) permitting the Chief Constable to take specific account of criminal convictions overseas;
- (ix) introducing minimum standards of competency in firearms handling, validated by test, as a condition for grant of firearms certificate;
- (x) permitting persons aged between 14 and 18 years to use a shotgun or airgun with ammunition for sporting purposes and vermin control on specified lands and subject to adult supervision;
- (xi) introducing minimum statutory conditions for firearms clubs and extending their authorisation from three to six years;
- (xii) extending the grounds on which firearms dealers' authorisation can be refused;
- (xiii) broadening the police's powers of search with warrant to include public safety grounds;
- (xiv) extending the RUC's power to ballistically test firearms to include all categories of guns;
- (xv) extending the Chief Constable's powers of delegation to include civilians specialising in firearms matters;
- (xvi) redefining the legal criteria for "antique" firearms;
- (xvii) in firearms appeals to the Secretary of State, making such decisions binding on the Chief Constable;
- (xviii) requiring persons legally prohibited from possessing a firearm, to serve a minimum period before seeking removal of their prohibition;
- (xix) the Northern Ireland Office to issue and publish a Memorandum on Firearms Law and Policy for the guidance of the Chief Constable;
- (xx) the Secretary of State to establish a non-statutory Firearms Consultative Forum.

It would also be the Secretary of State's intention to introduce most of the reforms recommended by Lord Cullen to enhance controls over firearms clubs generally. These would also include reforms to improve the rigour of police investigations into prospective firearms' holders.



With regard to handguns, my Secretary of State has already told David Trimble and John Taylor that she will not now be bringing forward legislation this year which would have prohibited the private ownership of handguns, personal protection weapons excepted. Indeed, there was never any intention to ban PPWs so long as there remained any possibility of terrorist violence resuming. Nonetheless, the Secretary of State has indicated her intention to publish her other proposals as a Consultation Paper, and she believes these will be generally welcomed by the Unionist community. There has been some misinformed and alarmist speculation by some Unionists (notably John Taylor) that the Secretary of State was intending to prohibit or restrict the legal ownership of shotguns and rifles, particularly those of the farming community. This has never been her intention but the speculation has nonetheless raised needless Unionist concerns.

On a final note, you asked what implications any future ban on target pistols might have for those wishing to use firearms club ranges for PPW practice. Owners of PPWs are not legally required to practice, although some (a minority) undoubtedly do so. While some firearms clubs would undoubtedly choose to close following any such ban, we are confident there would be sufficient ranges available to permit continued practice by PPW holders if they so chose.

My Minister has asked me to advise you that he is travelling to his home in Scotland at this moment but will be available after 8.00 pm should you wish clarification on any aspect of these reforms. My Minister would also be willing to meet Mr Trimble, at short notice, to discuss his concerns if you think that would be useful.

I hope this is helpful.

*Yours sincerely
Steven McCourt*

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