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*Lic*  
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*Dear Ann,*

**NORTHERN IRELAND GRAND COMMITTEE (NIGC)**

I have been giving thought to the most appropriate way to develop the Northern Ireland Grand Committee (NIGC).

I know that each of the three regional Grand Committees have slightly different Standing Orders which have been designed to meet local needs, reflecting our policy on devolution within the United Kingdom.

The policy issues in Northern Ireland are of course very different from those in Scotland and Wales. We need to ensure that any development of the NIGC is not perceived as an "integrationary" step, which might encourage SDLP reservations about the Committee. The Unionist parties on the other hand, and in particular the UUP, are very keen to see the Grand Committee developed. Given the current need to sustain good relations with the UUP I would therefore like to activate some of the new Standing Orders of the NIGC as a Unionist-friendly gesture. Without giving them all they seek, there are some of the Standing Orders which I believe can be activated to the advantage of Northern Ireland affairs and the completion of Government business.

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First, I would like to use the Standing Orders of the NIGC to facilitate a mini question time and an occasional NIO Ministerial statement. Amongst other things, that would compensate for the reduction in the time allocated to Northern Ireland Questions on the floor of the House, and give all Northern Ireland MPs (including the SDLP) greater opportunities to hold NIO Ministers to account. I believe we could come to an amicable arrangement with the Northern Ireland parties about the identification of subjects for debate in the Grand Committee, in addition to short adjournment debates. From our side, I would like to promote the long standing power of the NIGC to debate Proposals for Draft Orders in Council and, if that was successful, to use the facility within the Standing Orders to take certain Draft Orders and Orders in Council in the NIGC instead of on the floor of the House or in Standing Committee. A Grand Committee debate on public expenditure allocation would also be welcomed by the Northern Ireland parties. This would be on a par with past practice in the Scottish Grand Committee and I would be grateful for your advice on whether this is likely to be continued in the future in that Committee.

I would also like to be able to offer a meeting of the NIGC in Northern Ireland. This would, of course, be subject to a venue being found that was satisfactory to the House authorities and also from the security point of view.

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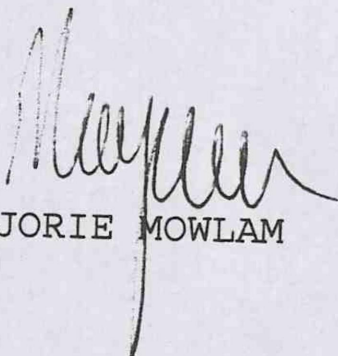


All told, I envisage around six to eight meetings of the NIGC a year, including one or two to be held a Northern Ireland venue.

If you and copy recipients are content to proceed on this basis I should be grateful if you would ask your officials, in consultation with mine, to work up the necessary motion.

I am meeting David Trimble on Wednesday of this week to discuss the Northern Ireland legislative programme and the future of the NIGC. I intend to tell him that I am consulting colleagues about the development of the NIGC and that I expect a motion on the NIGC to be tabled when the House resumes in October. You may also wish to give a similarly positive signal if the subject of the NIGC is raised in Thursday's adjournment debate.

I am sending copies of this letter to the Prime Minister (with whom David Trimble raised this issue last week) and to Donald Dewar, Ron Davies, Nick Brown and Sir Robin Butler.

  
MARJORIE MOWLAM

SOFS/TAYLOR/BB