

26-SEP-1997 19:36

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Cc PB
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PRIME MINISTER

ROLE OF PARADES COMMISSION

1. As you know, we are committed to putting in place new arrangements for handling parades in Northern Ireland as recommended in the North Report. I shall write shortly to you and colleagues seeking policy approval for the necessary Bill, which would be introduced next month. But there is one aspect of the policy which I should like to clear with you before circulating my proposals to IN.

2. Concerns have been expressed by the Loyal Orders and leading Unionists that North focused too much on expressions of **Protestant** cultural identity (ie parades), and that the Parades Commission should have a broader role and title which would permit unionists to raise **nationalist** activities which might be offensive to **their** community. David Trimble has sought an assurance that this broader role would be implemented in the Bill. (He has also sought commitment on two other points, both of which will be covered in legislation.)

3. I have been considering the way forward. Two considerations weigh against an **immediate** extension of the remit. **First**, the Commission are strongly opposed to any extension, believing that it would divert their energies from the significant challenge of their new parades powers and might well prove unworkable. Members would probably resign if faced with immediate extension. This might well impair the credibility of the new arrangements. The RUC also have reservations about the possible

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The War
here is summer

See 510

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Prime Minister

This is ingenious, but I am not entirely sure it will work. I am not really sure what it meant by X, and why this should cause members of the Commission to resign if included immediately. Nevertheless it is worth exploring - and I would strongly recommend us to discuss it with the Unionists first, frankly, rather than presenting them with a fait accompli.

OK? ✓
Any views?
JL
26/9.

//x

26-SEP-1997 19:36

PRIV OFF STORMONT

01232 760481 P.02



implications of an extended role. **Second**, the Unionist expectation that this new role for the Commission would somehow "redress the balance" could well be mistaken. The arrangements would work both ways, and **Sinn Fein** would probably be more adept at exploiting this than the unionists. When unionists realise this, their desire for the broader remit may diminish. More generally Nationalists would react adversely to any additional role for the Commission which they saw as facilitating attacks on their traditions and culture.

4. We therefore have to steer between the dual pitfalls of worsening relations with the Irish and SDLP (by an immediate move in this direction), and alienating David Trimble and the Loyal Orders (by taking no action). (Unionists are unlikely to be fully satisfied anyway, since it would be impracticable to give the Commission any **executive** role over the very diverse issues involved which would parallel the defined powers it will have over parades).

5. I therefore propose to take a **balanced approach** in meeting Unionist concerns. Under this, the Bill **would** give the Commission a duty to monitor and make recommendations to the Secretary of State concerning the law and practice relating to expressions of cultural identity other than parades, but this duty would only **come into effect** when I prescribed - and I would not intend to do so for at least the first year of the Commission's life. Thus, the provision would be on the face of the Bill (meeting what the Unionists may see as a commitment to them); would not be in immediate operation (and may never come on stream - even so, the Irish may still be critical); and will permit the Commission to concentrate undisturbed, for its

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26-SEP-1997 19:37

PRIV OFF STORMONT

01232 760481 P.03



first marching season at least, on establishing its authority in the parades area. The Bill would also provide that the body should continue to be called the Parades Commission, but would in addition effectively provide for it to have a subsidiary title reflecting the full range of its actual and potential responsibilities.

6. I believe that the approach I am proposing meets our commitment to David Trimble and the Loyal Orders. But I thought that I should check with you before proceeding.

7. I should much appreciate it if you were able to confirm that you are content with the approach I am proposing on this matter. A copy of this goes to Sir Robin Butler.

MARJORIE MOWLAM

26 September 1997

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