

Ireland Part 17



Prime Minister ✓ PB
I have had a careful AC

look at that, given the sensitivities
of advising. It seems to be a genuinely neutral
consultation exercise, and not likely to
alienate the Unionists (indeed they should
be more welcoming than the nationalists).

Prime Minister

CONSULTATION PAPER ON POLICE/COMMUNITY LINKS IN NORTHERN IRELAND
'YOUR VOICE - YOUR CHOICE': POLICY CLEARANCE

Content?

Yes

1/2

The purpose of this letter is to seek IN Committee's approval to the launch of a consultation paper on police/community links in Northern Ireland. I do not see a need for a Committee meeting to discuss the proposals contained in the document, although I will be happy for a meeting to take place if colleagues feel it necessary.

Purpose of the consultation document

The consultation document represents the first step in discharging the commitment, made in the Labour Party discussion paper 'Policing in Northern Ireland - A service for all people', to reform the method of appointment of the membership of the Police Authority for Northern Ireland, making it more representative of the whole community here. The document also offers preliminary thoughts on how these proposals might be adapted if the current talks process leads to the establishment of a devolved assembly in Northern Ireland.

The document also offers options for strengthening the role of Community Police Liaison Committees in Northern Ireland (also a commitment made in 'Policing in Northern Ireland - A Service for All People'). In addition, it touches on how police community partnerships in Northern Ireland might be strengthened.

Detail

The membership of the Police Authority for Northern Ireland is currently appointed by the Secretary of State through a process of open competition, conducted in accordance with the principles laid down by the Commissioner for Public Appointments. The consultation paper puts forward options, (see below) in a deliberately neutral way for reforming this system, which



is regularly criticised for giving too much power to the Secretary of State; creating an Authority which is perceived to be a "toothless poodle"; and which is not perceived to ensure that the whole community is represented effectively.

Options

- Having the Secretary of State appoint on merit, some or all members of the Authority following local competitions held in the various regions of Northern Ireland. This change would aim to ensure a better regional balance among the membership of the Authority.
- Having some elected members on the Authority "as of right". These would be selected either by direct election (one of the options for the Metropolitan Police), or by drawing members from existing elected bodies in proportion to party strengths (as is the case with English and Welsh Police Authorities).
- Having a wholly elected Authority, again, either through direct election, or through drawing the membership from a pre existing elected body in proportion to party strengths (which follows Scottish practice).
- Giving the Authority the power to elect its own Chairman and Vice Chairman. These offices are currently filled by Secretary of State appointment. This last could be combined with any of the other options.

Community Police Liaison Committees

The Police Authority for Northern Ireland and the RUC currently maintain a network of Community Police Liaison Committees, covering most of Northern Ireland. The document offers the following options for strengthening the role of CPLCs:

- Giving such bodies a statutory basis, thereby more clearly defining their powers and responsibilities;



- Requiring district councils in Northern Ireland to ensure that at least one Community Police Liaison Committee exists within their area, and further requiring them to participate in the business of the Committee.

The document also examines the possibility of setting up partnerships between the police and other statutory and voluntary bodies within Northern Ireland, to combat crime, in ways which are appropriate to Northern Ireland's particular circumstances, and its unique systems of local government, public service provision, and criminal justice.

Political Aspects

There is no particular GB political interest in the options contained in this document: the options for Police Authority membership drawn from elected representatives are derived from existing GB practice, and sit well alongside the ideas developed in the current White Paper on NDPBs. The 'local partnership' ideas are in essence following Jack's work albeit reinterpreted for Northern Ireland's very different structures and culture; and we are seeking initial views and comments.

I have considered carefully the Northern Ireland implications, particularly in the light of the present delicate political situation. Unionist parties are likely to welcome the fact that the Government is considering introducing an elected element, as of right, into the membership of the Authority. Nationalist parties may be less sanguine about these aspects, and may also have concerns about the prospect of District Councils being required to participate in local community-police liaison committees, although this does offer the potential to address their wish for stronger local elements in police accountability.

But they (and many others) will appreciate an opportunity to air their views, and to be informed on the current system, which is widely perceived as flawed. It is most important to emphasise that this is a genuine consultation; and that the Government is keen that the matters covered in the document are discussed and considered by the parties, and by the wider community in Northern Ireland.



We make it clear the Government has no set preferences at present on what should be done in this sensitive area. The current appointments process (especially since the advent of the Peach/Nolan guidelines) actually "works" quite well in producing a theoretically 'balanced' Authority. However, this is not widely perceived to be the case, and there is little doubt that the primacy of the Secretary of State in appointing each and every member does cast a psychological shadow on the Authority's perceived independence and strength.

Public discussion of the issues is needed to help raise levels of awareness. I would not anticipate early legislation being introduced as a result of the consultation, unless it becomes clear that a strong consensus is emerging in favour of a particular option, from across the whole community here, and that there are agreed to be no significant 'down sides' to that option.

Public expenditure/manpower

None of these proposals should carry major resource implications. Further detailed work will be required on the implementation of any particular option before its precise resource implications can be accurately gauged.

Impact on business

These proposals should have no direct impact on business.

ECHR aspects

These proposals should have no ECHR implications.

Conclusion

I should be grateful to know by 2 February if you and other copy recipients are content with the publication of the consultation paper, to facilitate public debate in Northern Ireland, and to form a focus for discussion of this aspect of policing in Talks, if the participants so wish.



A copy of this letter goes to members of IN, the Secretary of State for Scotland, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, and Sir Robin Butler.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Mowlam", written in a cursive style.

MARJORIE MOWLAM
21 January 1998