



File VLB

cc NIO

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THE PRIME MINISTER

18 October 1996

Dear Lord Luke,

Thank you for your letter of 30 August enclosing a memorandum prepared by yourself, Lord Moyola and Viscount Brookeborough, following your meeting with Michael Ancram on 20 August. I am sorry that you have not received a reply before now.

To take your last point first - and as I am sure Michael Ancram will have made clear - the Government is unequivocally committed to the maintenance of the Union, while that remains the wish of the majority. The position is unambiguously set out in statute. Moreover - and in no small part as a result of our efforts - there is widespread acceptance throughout Ireland of the principle that constitutional change in Northern Ireland would require the consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland. All significant political parties, North and South, now acknowledge it, except for Sinn Fein.

As I said only last week, I do not believe that Northern Ireland will leave the United Kingdom, nor do I wish it to. I cherish Northern Ireland's role within the Union.

Your memorandum underlines the strength of feeling expressed by moderate Unionists during the summer. This was indeed plain to see. But many of the perceptions which underlay those strong feelings are simply not borne out by the facts.

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For instance, there is no foundation for the perception that concessions of any kind have been made to IRA/Sinn Fein, in response either to violence or to threats of violence. Nor is there any basis for thinking that events in Northern Ireland are being increasingly influenced from Dublin. The British Government is the sole sovereign authority in Northern Ireland. And, as I know Michael Ancram made especially plain to you at your meeting, the suggestion that the Irish Government were somehow able to influence what happened at Drumcree is simply wrong. We have done and will continue to do all we can to counter and correct such misperceptions.

That said, I share your concerns about what took place at Drumcree. Some of the events were inexcusable, both in themselves and because of their impact on attitudes on both sides of the community.

But there can only be peace in Northern Ireland if all its citizens - Protestant and Catholic alike - feel that their traditions have a welcome place in the United Kingdom. And there will only be peace of mind if we remove the causes that have given rise to so much conflict.

That is what the multi-Party talks are for - and why they are so urgent. They have made progress - albeit slow - and they remain, to use your phrase, the best hope of "rebuilding democracy".

But I also want to make government in Northern Ireland more accountable, and to give MPs more responsibility. So, this autumn, we shall be giving Northern Ireland members greater ability to question Ministers and to scrutinise Government policies - precisely through the Grand Committee to which you refer. We shall be consulting the parties about how best to achieve that.

In short, we shall continue to do everything in our power to facilitate progress towards our overriding objective of an enduring peace and a lasting political settlement. I am keenly aware of the differences in outlook that will have to be overcome, and of the difficulties created by the summer's events. But the talks process now under way is providing hope of political advance; and we frankly do not believe that this could be secured in any other way.

Yours Sincerely,
The Lord Cooke

The Lord Cooke of Islandreagh, O.B.E.