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to JHA  
JEH

From the Private Secretary

9 December 1996

Dear Robert,

**P.Q. FROM ROBERT MCCARTNEY**

You have been discussing with the Scottish Office, and subsequently with me, the best way to answer Robert McCartney's unstarred P.Q. (number 92):

To ask the Prime Minister, if he will list the strategic and economic interests which require the maintenance of the Union between Scotland and England, and which do not apply to the Union with Northern Ireland?

While it seems common ground to say that:

- "the Union hugely benefits all four members" and that:
- "there are no strategic or economic interests which could override the democratic wishes of the people of each constituent part of the United Kingdom in relation to their place within it".

you and the Scottish Office cannot agree over precisely how to express the Government's commitment to the Union - not because there is any doubt over this, but because you think that the consent principle sits uneasily alongside it.

The Prime Minister's own strong commitment to the Union is not in doubt. You will often have heard him say, for instance, that "I am a Conservative and a Unionist". He also made clear his own views about Northern Ireland's place in the Union in his Conference speech ("I don't believe Northern Ireland will leave the United Kingdom, nor do I wish it to").

Against this background, could I suggest the following reformulation, which I hope will meet both your and Scottish Office concerns:

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- "I firmly believe that the maintenance of the Union is strongly in the interests of each part of the United Kingdom, as well as of the United Kingdom as a whole. But there are no strategic or economic interests which could override the democratic wishes of the people of each constituent part of the United Kingdom in relation to their place within it."

If either you or the Scottish Office continue to have difficulties, could I ask that your Ministers discuss the issue directly, and revert to us with an agreed formula?

I would be helpful to have an agreed text **by close this evening please.**

I am copying this letter to Michael Lugton (Scottish Office).

*Yours ever,*

*Edward Oakden*

EDWARD OAKDEN

Robert Crawford, Esq.,  
Northern Ireland Office.

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