



Northern Ireland Office
Parliament Buildings
Belfast BT4 3ST

Mrs Monica McWilliams
NI Women's Coalition
C/o Block B
Castle Buildings
Stormont Estate
Belfast BT4 3SG

February 1998

Dear Monica,

PLANNING FOR A REFERENDUM: THE FRANCHISE

Administrative planning for a referendum is now underway and we have reached the point where we need to make decisions on certain central aspects of the legislation. In particular I would welcome your party's view on the extent of the franchise we should employ.

My own view is that on a matter of such importance it should be as broad as possible. Naturally those entitled to vote must be registered electors - that is, they must satisfy Northern Ireland's three month residential qualification. As you know, the Parliamentary franchise excludes peers and European Union citizens but includes overseas voters. The Local Government franchise includes peers and European Union citizens but excludes overseas voters.

My inclination on this occasion is to include peers but exclude European Union citizens and overseas voters. I see no compelling argument to include European Union citizens resident in Northern Ireland and I feel it would be inequitable to allow overseas voters a voice which is not available to Northern Irish people living in Great Britain by virtue of them not satisfying the residential qualification. Suspending the residential qualification is not an option I would support.

I would, therefore, appreciate an early response from you on this matter so we can continue to make progress on the referendum preparations.

Marjorie
MARJORIE MOWLAM

*Copy to Carmel
for information
& ask for thoughts
for response*