

2 January 1997,

Rt Hon Sir Patrick Mayhew MP QC,  
Secretary of State for Northern Ireland,  
Stormont Castle,  
BELFAST BT4 3ST

Thank you for your letters of 23 October, and 20 December, and my apologies for the delay in replying.

I have discussed the matter of extending the role of the Northern Ireland Grand Committee with my colleagues, and I have to say that we are not at all happy about the proposal.

It must be obvious of course that we have used the current PES briefing system and have found that the opportunity it gives for those with direct economic interest and expertise (the Finance and Economy Spokesmen for the parties) to have the material directly from ministers, is preferable to restricting it to those who happen to be on the committee, but may not have the greatest appreciation on the subject.

There are however wider problems. In the dying days of a parliament, it is hard to see that there is any practical advantage in bringing forward such a proposal. It would however be seen as a political prize which would be held aloft by those who have no interest in working for power-sharing devolution, which we agree to be the best form of governance for this divided society. In this way it would not only be a distraction from the real business of negotiating a settlement, but could be a real diversion. The current proposition by the UUP that the Talks be abandoned until after the election, coming upon their obstructionist tactics prior to Christmas should not be rewarded by more material to assist in their negativism.

You will also be aware that **all** the Northern Ireland parties have been making clear to Michael that they are opposed to his proposals for the reorganisation of Education Administration in Northern Ireland. We have met on a number of occasions with the other parties on this, and have separately and together communicated our opposition to the proposals. This opposition was expressed precisely on the basis that such tinkering with the system in the midst of Talks about the whole form of governance of Northern Ireland, was inappropriate, and should come post hoc. It would be entirely

inconsistent for us, or others to say this about one part of the system, and yet support any proposals for an ad hoc change to another part of the system.

I could say more, but I think that this is enough to show that Alliance would not be prepared at this time to give support to proposals to extend the remit of the Northern Ireland Grand Committee.

We will perhaps have an opportunity before long to discuss the prospects for political progress, but meantime may I wish you and yours a very Happy New Year.