



From the Minister

## Department of Economic Development

Lord Alderdice FRCIP FRCPsych  
House of Lords  
LONDON  
SW1A 0PW

31 March 1998

Dear John

You wrote to me expressing your concern that this dispute has been continuing for some time now. I am equally concerned.

Unlike other more conventional disputes which may involve LRA intervention, the cause of this dispute has nothing to do with reductions in jobs or pay. Staff claim that, in advertising and filling a post by open competition, Management at the Agency breached procedural agreements regarding changes in terms and conditions of employment. Management assert strongly that there have been no such changes to contracts and that in filling this post by open competition the Agency was doing no more than its duty as an employer seeking to fill an important post on the basis of merit.

The means of resolving the dispute is, in the first instance, a matter for management and staff of the Agency. Failing that, one option, as you suggest, is to establish a Court of Inquiry and I have not ruled out this possibility. However it would clearly help the credibility of the Agency if the staff showed willingness to resolve the dispute internally. One such means is a committee to Inquire which was requested by the staff's Union NIPSA last August. This was subsequently offered by management but rejected by the

local NIPSA Branch. That offer remains open. The local NIPSA Branch have also been dismissive of a Court of Inquiry, suggesting that it could be a waste of money. Any procedure needs the willingness of both parties if it is to be effective.

I have followed this dispute closely since I took office but I have carefully refrained from doing or saying anything which might make matters worse. However, I am now bound to say to you, as an important leader in the NI community, that I find incomprehensible the behaviour of staff who are supposed to be providing a service of conciliation. They seem to have a very poor grasp of their duties and obligations to their employer, clients and ultimately their paymaster - the taxpayer. I firmly believe that management and staff must get into a meaningful internal resolution procedure. The dispute has persisted in a manner quite out of proportion to the substance. A meeting between management and NIPSA is to take place within the next two weeks. I have asked for a report on the outcome.

*Yours Sincerely  
Adam*

**ADAM INGRAM JP MP**  
**Minister of State**