

SELECT COMMITTEE ON NORTHERN IRELAND AFFAIRS

Speaking Note

- There has been much speculation that the Government is about to introduce a Select Committee. Speculation is all it is. The Procedure Committee have argued for a Northern Ireland Select Committee since the 1970s and are now re-examining their earlier ideas on composition. They meet again on 24 November. We will naturally consider their conclusions.
- This is not the fruit of a "deal". The Government has held off from introducing a Committee because it was judged right to discuss it in the Talks and issues of cross-party support needed to be addressed. The Procedure Committee made it clear that the Government could not postpone a decision indefinitely; the Chairman said so again yesterday (Thursday).
- A Committee would be justified on its merits. It would not be "integrationist". It would improve democratic accountability to the benefit of both sides of the community; neither would benefit more than the other. It would not pre-empt the outcome of the Talks. Nor would its effect be novel: existing Departmental Select Committees already examine Northern Ireland affairs (and Mr Mallon is a member of the Agriculture Select Committee).
- If pressed - the Hume/Adams talks have created a crisis of confidence in the Unionist community, on top of an already volatile security situation. Even moderate Unionists (eg Reg Empey, the Lord Mayor of Belfast) are voicing serious concerns. In those circumstances the Government has a duty to respond; it is in the public interest to lower the temperature.

Background

As far back as 1978 the Procedure Committee has argued the case for a Northern Ireland Select Committee. The only reason it did not recommend one then was because of continuing uncertainty over the future constitutional arrangements for the Province. In its 1990 report the Committee concluded that "the uncertainties over the future administration of the Province (cannot) be allowed to preclude indefinitely the establishment of proper arrangements for the scrutiny by the House of the Northern Ireland Department", but they accepted that it was not a sensible moment to recommend the establishment of a Select Committee. They had noted the view of the Secretary of State that this was an issue best considered in the context of political Talks. They concluded that "the Government cannot postpone dealing with this matter for very much longer".

The Government's public posture since 1990 has been that a Select Committee may, in principle, be desirable but that a number of issues, including the extent of support from elected representatives from both sides of the community, need to be considered, and the matter would be kept under review. At its meeting on 26 October the Procedure Committee held to its 1990 report but decided to re-examine the possible composition of a Select Committee. If a Committee were to be set up, it would be for the Lord President to table amendments to Standing Orders specifying the size of the Committee and the quorum, and for the Committee of Selection to table a motion on the allocation of seats and individual membership.