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Minister of State

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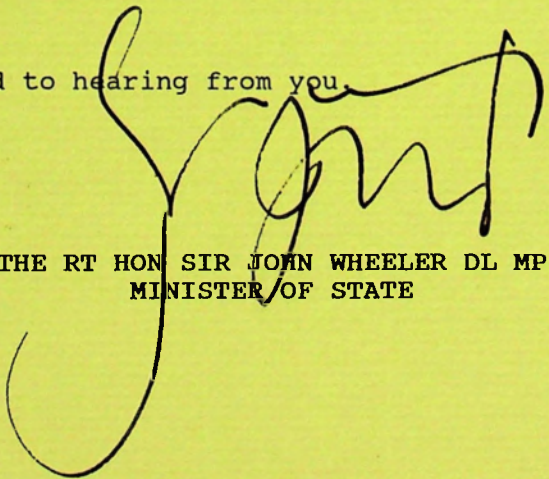
November 1995

As you may be aware from my Answer in the House of Commons today (a copy of which is enclosed for your convenience), I have concluded that the law on firearms, which dates from 1981, would benefit from a fundamental review of its scope and operation, and have asked my officials to get the necessary work underway. This will involve extensive consultation with various interest groups and individuals including the shooting organisations and the Chief Constable. I am anxious to hear what ideas or proposals people have for improving the legislation which has been largely unchanged since the late 1960s. Uppermost in my mind of course, will be the need to maintain adequate standards of individual and public safety.

The Review's Terms of Reference are attached.

The purpose of my writing therefore is firstly, to formally advise you of the review and secondly, to invite you to submit whatever views you may have both on the present firearms law and the future shape of legislation in this area.

I look forward to hearing from you.



THE RT HON SIR JOHN WHEELER DL MP
MINISTER OF STATE

MOFS/10019

DATE FOR ANSWER: 22 NOVEMBER 1995

23 NOVEMBER 1995

WRITTEN NO: 279

MR NIGEL EVANS (RIBBLE VALLEY): To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans he has for reviewing the law on firearms.(2798)

SIR JOHN WHEELER

The Firearms (Northern Ireland) Order 1981 provides for the licensing and control of firearms in the Province. Although it has been amended on a number of occasions, most recently last year when new offences relating to imitation firearms were introduced, the law has been largely unchanged since the 1960s. Indeed its origins can be traced back to the 1920s. This in itself would suggest reasonable cause for a fresh look at the law. However, in addition, developments in firearms technology and design have proceeded apace and we have seen a growth nationally in the recreational and sporting use of firearms. For these reasons therefore, I believe that the time is right to take a new look at the law on firearms, to ensure not only that it is appropriate to today's conditions; but also that it strikes the right balance between public and individual safety and the reasonable expectations of shooters who want to use their firearms in a responsible and legitimate manner.

The review will be thorough and painstaking. There is much ground to cover. I will, of course, want to take the views of the shooting organisations as well as public representatives, the RUC and safety groups. To that end, I am writing today to Northern Ireland Honourable Members and my officials are similarly writing to the political party organisations and other interest groups inviting comment and proposals on what changes to the law they would like to see.

The review team will work under the direction of a Steering Committee comprising a senior NIO official, assisted by a senior RUC officer with experience in firearms administration and a person of standing with relevant expertise. I have asked them to complete their work and to let me have their report with proposals for change, by August 1996. Thereafter I will publish the proposals for wider consultation. I do not expect new legislation to be in place before the latter part of 1997.

REVIEW OF FIREARMS LEGISLATION

TERMS OF REFERENCE

To consider whether and how the Firearms (Northern Ireland) Order 1981 should be amended taking account of:

- the protection of public and individual safety;
- the use of firearms in the commission of crime;
- the legitimate use of firearms in recreational, sporting and business activities;
- developments in gun technology and design;
- the Secretary of State's role and responsibilities;
- the resources used in firearms administration and enforcement; and
- the consolidation of earlier amendments.