



NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE
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Prime Minister ②

Murdo MacLean Esq
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To see. I don't think you need
read all the background
papers but you
might want to
look at the text of the Q and A at
May A with 10/12

10 December 1993

Dear Murdo,

SELECT COMMITTEE ON NORTHERN IRELAND AFFAIRS

We spoke yesterday about the latest position on a Northern
Ireland Select Committee.

I mentioned to you that my Secretary of State now takes the
view that the time has arrived for the Government to declare
public support for the appointment of a Select Committee on
Northern Ireland affairs. He would like to see some public
announcement made before Christmas that consultations will
take place with the other parties on the footing that the
time for a Northern Ireland Select Committee has now come.
The Prime Minister supports this view.

We spoke briefly about how and when such an announcement
might be made. One idea is that there might be an exchange
at Business Questions next Thursday, 16 December. Sir Peter
Emery, or another Government member of the Procedure
Committee, might be invited to ask a question. A draft of a
possible question and answer is attached.

If an announcement were to be made on Thursday, then it would seem sensible for the Chief Whip not to embark on soundings with the other parties until it is made. We expect some difficulties with the SDLP but these are likely to be smoothed if we wait until Thursday.

As we discussed, Sir Patrick thinks it best if the Chief Whip takes the lead in consultations with the other parties, including Northern Ireland parties. This will emphasise that it is primarily a parliamentary matter. But there are some points of particular sensitivity to Northern Ireland and the Talks process. These are:

- resistance from the SDLP (and, to a lesser extent, Labour) to the principle of a Committee on the grounds that it pre-empts the outcome of the Talks process, an argument that can be countered on its merits;
- securing a reasonable balance of representation between the Northern Ireland parties. The nationalist:unionist split should at least reflect the broad balance in the House of 1:3. The Procedure Committee left open the question of the exact split between the parties, and merely advised that all the Northern Ireland parties at Westminster should be represented and that a total membership of 13 or 15 would be acceptable. Sir Patrick's preference is for a Committee of 15, composed of 7 Conservatives, 2 Labour, 2 UUP, 1 DUP, 1 UPUP (Sir James Kilfedder - Chairman), and 2

SDLP. If we could find a way to give the SDLP 2 seats this might help to sell the idea to them; John Hume has started to take a firm line against the Committee in the past couple of weeks. It might also help to head off extra bids from the Labour party, who will be disappointed with 2 seats; a Labour/SDLP block of 4 seats would sit comfortably alongside 4 for the unionist parties. If a Committee of 13 (with 1 SDLP member) were decided upon then to preserve balance it should have no more than 3 unionist MPs (including Sir James Kilfedder if asked);

- embracing all the Secretary of State's responsibilities, not just the NIO. To restrict the remit solely to the NIO's responsibilities could lead to an unhealthy concentration on security and political issues. It is therefore essential that it should also consider the work of the Northern Ireland Departments (Agriculture, Economic Development, Education, Environment, Finance and Personnel, Health and Social Services). In the event of agreement through the Talks that responsibility for these developments should be transferred to a Northern Ireland Assembly, they would fall out of the Select Committee's remit; this is a point which should reassure the SDLP we are not prejudging the outcome of the Talks process.

- the classified nature of a substantial proportion
of the NIO's work. Ministers will be considering
the implications of this for relations with the
Committee: a point which could usefully be flagged
up now.

Copies go to Roderic Lyne and Dugald Sandeman.

Yours,

Jonathan

JONATHAN STEPHENS