

NORTHERN IRELAND SELECT COMMITTEE

Lines to take

- The Government has now decided to undertake consultations with the parties, on foot of the Procedure Committee Report, on the basis that the time for a Select Committee has now arrived.
- The outcome of those consultations will be brought to the attention of the House in due course.
- The case for a Northern Ireland Select Committee, in terms of ensuring proper Parliamentary accountability for the Secretary of State's responsibilities, is unanswerable.
- The appointment of a Committee would close what the Procedure Committee has described as an "anomaly" in the Select Committee system; it will not involve any great issue of principle since existing Select Committees already can, and do, investigate Northern Ireland affairs.
- We would flatly reject any suggestion that a Committee would be "integrationist" or would favour one side of the community in Northern Ireland at the expense of the other. Both sides of the community stand to benefit from it.
- We do not accept that the appointment of a Committee would in any way damage the Talks process. It would not prejudice any particular outcome. Should new institutions be created in Northern Ireland the remit of the Committee could be adjusted accordingly.
- There is a clear sense from the Committee's reports in 1978 and 1990 that the case for a Select Committee has been made. The only points of issue have been the timing and composition.
- I accept that, in the past, the Government has been hesitant to appoint a Select Committee in case it cut across work on the political Talks. However, the Procedure Committee made it clear in 1990 that "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" and because it cannot be guaranteed that new, multilateral Talks will start again soon, and reach a successful conclusion, the Government does not wish to delay any further. I would emphasise that the appointment of a Committee need not prejudice the conduct of Talks.

- I also accept that the Government has taken the position that the House would no doubt be reluctant to establish a Committee without the support of elected representatives from both sides of the community in Northern Ireland, as well as wider support within the House. But as I have made clear, a Committee is fully justified on its merits and it would be wrong to delay further.
- It would not be right to restrict the Committee's remit solely to those issues that do not currently come within the terms of other Select Committees. A new Committee should be capable of examining the NIO's policies in the round and it would be inefficient and cumbersome if there were substantial duplication.
4. The SDLP and, to a lesser extent, the Labour Party will oppose the Committee in principle and on its probable composition. Both regard a Select Committee as an "integrationist" move, which favours the Union at the expense of those who hope that Northern Ireland will one day separate from the United Kingdom. Both may see it as affecting the balance of the political talks. The NIO would deny that it has any integrationist effect. Existing Select Committees already scrutinise Northern Ireland matters. A Committee would benefit both sides of the community in Northern Ireland and its