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IRISH EMBASSY, LONDON.

26 November, 1992.

Mr. David Donoghue,
Counsellor,
Anglo-Irish Division,
Department of Foreign Affairs,
Dublin.

Some comments from the Whips Office

Dear David,

I had dinner on 19 November with Murdo MacLean of the Whips Office and in the light of our conversation last week I felt you might be interested in the following points of interest which arose.

Westminster reform

Murdo recalled that some months ago the NIO, in the person of David Hill had been in touch with the office of the Clerk of the Commons, Sir Clifford Boulton, requesting briefing papers on the various areas where parliamentary accountability over NI business might be improved. The Clerk had drawn the Whips Office into the exercise and, according to Murdo, they had "put together a few ideas" on how the Order in Council system might be streamlined.

According to Murdo there was a degree of scepticism among senior House Commons staff about the merits of tinkering with the existing system. The Unionists clamour for greater accountability, including more Common time for NI legislation, had to be viewed against their poor attendance record and the limited use they made of the parliamentary time that was available to them.

Select Committee

He felt that the likelihood of a Select Committee on Northern Ireland being established could be too easily overstated. He recognised that it was the most accessible item on the Unionist menu and that Jim Molyneux whom he saw as the only NI MP who fully understood Westminster procedures, remained deeply attached to the idea. Nonetheless unless the parties, including the SDLP, were in agreement it was difficult to see how it could be constituted. It was not something that was entirely within the gift of the Government and its value therefore as a convenient plum to tempt Unionist support in a tight division could be misrepresented. Ultimately it was a matter for the House, and would require, for example, the approval of the opposition. It would be particularly difficult, if not impossible, to set up so long as Labour

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were opposed. Even if Labour were to acquiesce there remained the difficult question of deciding on its composition.

If, however, the Government, for whatever reason, were to throw their weight behind the idea it is likely that they could push it through since the final say on its establishment lay in the hands of Tony Newton, the Leader of the House. Murdo doubted if McNamara could hold a negative line indefinitely since the majority view among disinterested Labour MPs would reflect that of their opposite numbers on the Government side tending to the opinion that in principle there could be nothing against such a committee. With the Scottish Committee reconstituted the creation of a NI Select Committee would be seen by many MPs as merely filling an obvious gap in the system of parliamentary scrutiny. He also felt that John Smith, who as a Scottish Labour MP had been one of many who had castigated the Tories for their failure during the previous parliament constitute the Scottish Select Committee, might not easily be persuaded that a NI Select Committee was a bad thing.

Even if a Select Committee were established, Murdo wondered whether it merited any special degree of concern on our part. He understood its apparent significance for the OUP and the negative signals which its creation could send in terms of any resumed talks process. These considerations apart, however, he felt that when viewed in terms of the overall parliamentary process the powers of a Select Committee, although greater than those of some other Committees of the House, were, in practice, relatively limited. (On this point I would refer you to the paper which we prepared on this topic 21 April - a further copy of which I enclose.)

The Unionists

He contended that the OUP were gradually slipping out from under the shadow of Enoch Powell. He wondered, for example, how many of them, when they spoke of the need for reform of Westminster procedures, were merely paying lip service to the integrationism of Jim Molyneux, the last of the true believers in Powell's legacy. Apart from Molyneux none of the others would ever feel at home at Westminster and no amount of reform, including the granting of a Select Committee, was likely to alter that fact.

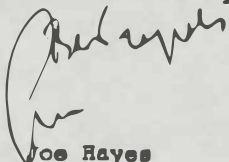
Murdo makes no secret of his lack of understanding of anything other than the broad outlines of NI politics. His comments on this occasion on the Unionist mindset, stem largely, I believe, from an evening which he has spent earlier in the week with Ken Maginnis. Maginnis, who seems to have reasonable social contacts around Westminster, had brought along Georg Thompson to introduce him to "the usual channels".

The Inter-Parliamentary Body

He remarked on the numerous positive references to the Body in the debate on the Secretary of State's statement on 10 November. This was one institution which did have the wholehearted support of the senior statesmen of the Commons. The Clerk, Clifford Boulton, had thrown his weight behind it from the early days and in appointing Bill Mackay as its Clerk on the British side had ensured that it would command respect in the House. He echoed a point which we frequently hear from Mackay when he wondered if there were not some way in which the Body could be taken out from under the aegis of the Inter-Parliamentary Union and given a substantial status.

more equivalent to a Select Committee. This is an interesting avenue of speculation but one which so far seems to find only limited support among the Steering Committee, at least to the extent that no one seems prepared to explore it further. Until this is the case it can be no more than a talking point among officials.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Joe Hayes", written in dark ink.

Joe Hayes