

From: PS/Secretary of State
9 November 1999

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Mr Brooker - O

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11/11

by 16/11

Mr Cavanagh

*- for a decision
& draft reply
 asap.*

SECRETARY OF STATE'S MEETING WITH THE NORTHERN IRELAND HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION: 8 NOVEMBER 15/11

The Secretary of State yesterday afternoon visited the NI Human Rights Commission at their City Centre offices. You were also present. All the members of the Commission other than Margaret-Ann Dinsmore were present.

2. Professor Dickson said that the two main issues on which they wished to focus were the resources available to the Commission and their work on the Bill of Rights. Before doing so, however, he wished to confirm that a paper on emergency legislation would be with NIO officials within the next week and that the Commission's response to Patten would be available by the end of the month. Because the Human Rights Act would have major implications for Government, the Commission was also looking for reassurance that arrangements were in hand in the NIO and NI Departments to provide officials with appropriate training. He and his colleagues then made the following points:

- consultation on the Bill of Rights was a major exercise for the Commission. They wished to maximise public participation in this and needed to be able to fund appropriate advertising, and to involve a wide range of individuals and groups. This would be money well spent, especially if it were seen as popular participation in the implementation of the GFA;
- the proposed Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland would go beyond the ECHR in important respects (eg parity of esteem, language rights etc).

There was a case for the proposed Bill of Rights to be put to a referendum;

- there was agreement amongst all the parties that a Bill of Rights would be a good thing. While the substance of the Bill was important, the process might also play a part in entrenching the GFA;
- there was a perception in some quarters that human rights organisations somehow represented a continuation of the civil rights movement and of 'establishment bashing'. The Commission, by contrast, saw themselves clearly as a vehicle for bringing the communities together, and the Bill of Rights exercise as an opportunity to do so;
- a section of the community saw the implementation of the human rights agenda as somehow inimical to their interests. This culture needed to be changed. The Commission could not be neutral on the issues, and had to intervene where they judged it right to do so, but in doing so they had to reassure people who might feel in some way threatened;
- the Secretary of State's predecessor had appeared to imply that she could not make changes in the emergency legislation for political reasons. This was a view which the Commission could not accept;
- the Commission would wish to come back to the Secretary of State with a strategic plan and detailed costings, to argue for the budget they needed to enable them to carry out their tasks properly.

3. The Secretary of State expressed gratitude for the briefing. The Commission was important and he wanted to see it operating effectively. That said, the NI Block was under serious pressure and faced demands from various directions, many stemming from the GFA. We would do what we could within available resources. He had looked at their strategic plan and looked forward to hearing the outcome of

the consultation. He agreed completely that it was essential for the Commission to reach out to both communities and to couch what they said and did in terms that appealed as far as possible to all sides. The Commission would have an important role in changing attitudes and in permeating the culture of human rights throughout society. If people were given a new framework and a new language, that would influence the way they approached issues. He would follow up the point on training for compliance with the Human Rights Act within the Northern Ireland governmental system [grateful if **PS/Mr Semple** could advise on this]. On the emergency powers, he would study the Commission's paper with care - he had no desire to throw away powers that remained necessary, but he was keen to see as much normalisation and integration into the wider UK framework as possible. He also looked forward to reading their views on Patten in due course.

Nick Perry

N P PERRY

PS/Secretary of State

☎ (B) 28110

(L) 6462

cc: PS/Secretary of State (B&L) - O
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Mr McCusker - O
Ms Scholefield - O
Mr Kelly - O
Mr Maccabe - O
Mr Priestly - O
Ms Wood - O
Miss Pearson - O