

RESTRICTED – EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

EC (00) 92B

From: Executive Secretariat

Date: 4 July 2000

To: Executive Committee

FLAGS

1. At the Executive Committee meeting on 8 June it was agreed that a small sub-committee should be established to consider the question of flags and report back at a future meeting of the Committee. Subsequently the Minister of Education, Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development were nominated to the sub-committee.
2. The sub-committee met three times, the last meeting on 3 July, and the minutes of each meeting are attached as an annex.
3. The first meeting established the range of possible options in relation to the flying of flags on government buildings and these were then considered at the subsequent meetings. There was no agreement about any of the options considered.
4. The Committee also discussed whether further meetings would lead to a solution. There was, however, no agreement on this and, in the circumstances, it was agreed that the Executive Committee should be advised of the position.

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The Executive Committee is invited to note the proceedings of the sub-committee established to consider the flying of flags on public buildings.

SUB-COMMITTEE ON FLAGS

EXECUTIVE SECRETARIAT JULY 2000

Those Present: Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development
Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure
Minister of Education

In Attendance: Mr Loughran
Mr McCusker
Mrs Flanagan
Mrs Rooney

1. The Sub-Committee noted that the view on the Unionist side remained that the question of flying the Union flag from Government buildings was a constitutional matter. Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom and Ministers in the Northern Ireland Executive have signed up to the consent principle and the Union flag should fly in Northern Ireland on Government buildings in the same way as it is flown in other parts of the UK. On the Nationalist side, the view is that the matter of flying flags from Government buildings is not simply a constitutional matter. It is a question of recognising that, under the Good Friday Agreement, the aspirations of both communities in Northern Ireland need to be acknowledged when dealing with symbols, flags and emblems and that there is a need to create neutral working places.
2. There was further discussion on possible options which might be acceptable to all parties, but there was no agreement on a way ahead.
3. The question of whether the Sub-Committee should continue to meet was discussed. The Unionist view is that there is no possibility of agreement within the Executive

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NORTHERN IRELAND EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

SUB-COMMITTEE ON FLAGS

MINUTES OF MEETING ON 3 JULY 2000

Those Present: **Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development**
 Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure
 Minister of Education

In Attendance: **Mr Loughran**
 Mr McCusker
 Mrs Flanagan
 Mrs Rooney

1. The Sub-Committee noted that the view on the Unionist side remained that the question of flying the Union flag from Government buildings was a constitutional matter. Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom and Ministers in the Northern Ireland Executive have signed up to the consent principle and the Union flag should fly in Northern Ireland on Government buildings in the same way as it is flown in other parts of the UK. On the Nationalist side, the view is that the matter of flying flags from Government buildings is not simply a constitutional matter. It is a question of recognising that, under the Good Friday Agreement, the aspirations of both communities in Northern Ireland need to be acknowledged when dealing with symbols, flags and emblems and that there is a need to create neutral working places.
2. There was further discussion on possible options which might be acceptable to all parties, but there was no agreement on a way ahead.
3. The question of whether the Sub-Committee should continue to meet was discussed. The Unionist view is that there is no possibility of agreement within the Executive

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Committee and that it should now be left to the Secretary of State to make a regulation on the flying of flags over Government buildings. The Nationalist view is that the Sub-Committee should continue in operation in order to demonstrate publicly and to the Secretary of State that the Executive Committee is continuing to try to resolve the issue.

4. In summary, the Sub-Committee:-

- noted that there was, at this stage, no consensus on a flag-flying policy or on the continuation of the Flags Sub-Committee;
- noted that the Secretary of State would be seeking a report on the Executive Committee's consideration of the issue; and
- agreed that a report should be provided for consideration at the Executive Committee meeting on 6 July.

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SUB-COMMITTEE ON FLAGS

MINUTES OF MEETING ON 22 JUNE 2000

Those present: Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development
Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure
Minister of Education

In attendance: Mr McCusker
Mrs Cassells

1. The Sub-Committee agreed that on the question of flag flying at Government buildings in

1. The sub-committee agreed the minutes of the meeting on 13 June.

2. It was noted that there is an expectation that the sub-committee will report back to the Executive Committee at its next meeting, scheduled for 29 June.

3. The sub-committee considered each of the four options outlined in the minutes of the last meeting, but failed to reach agreement on any.

4. It was suggested that there might be merit in a further meeting of the sub-committee, prior to the Executive Committee meeting, to finalise the report to the Executive. Mr Loughran has indicated that he would like to be involved in such a meeting. While there was no consensus that such a meeting would be worthwhile, Ministers indicated that they would be receptive to an invitation to the meet again.

5. It was agreed that Mr McCusker would circulate a draft report to the Executive for Ministers to consider, and he would arrange a further meeting to discuss the report prior to the Executive meeting if that would be considered helpful.

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NORTHERN IRELAND EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

SUB-COMMITTEE ON FLAGS

MINUTES OF MEETING ON 13 JUNE 2000

Those present: Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development
 Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure
 Minister of Education

In Attendance: Mr McCusker
 Mrs Flanagan

1. The Sub-Committee agreed that on the question of flag flying at Government buildings in Northern Ireland there were three potential outcomes.
 - an agreed outcome by the Executive Committee
 - failure by the Executive Committee to reach agreement on the matter leading to regulation by the Secretary of State
 - agreement in the Executive Committee on arrangements to 'narrow the gap' between differing views
2. The Sub-Committee agreed that it would be preferable for the Executive Committee to reach some form of agreement on the matter. The range of possible options was identified as follows:-
 - (i) maintain the status quo ante, with Ministers agreeing to continue to fly the Union flag on their buildings on the 20 days designated by the Secretary of State;
 - (ii) maintain the status quo as at present, with Ministers determining individually whether or not the flag should fly on each of the 20 days designated by the Secretary of State;

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- (iii) Ministers agree that on designated flag flying days both the Union flag and Tricolour should be flown at headquarters buildings;
- (iv) Ministers agree on a package of arrangements for flag flying which might include:
- an agreed list of designated days;
 - agreement on designated buildings for flag flying;
 - only one flag for all buildings with more than one Department; and
 - arrangements for flag flying at plenary meetings of the North/South Ministerial Council, both in the North and the South.

Variations on options (i) and (ii) around designated days and designated buildings could also be incorporated.

3. The Sub-Committee agreed to consider these options and any others which emerge and discuss them at a further meeting at the beginning of the following week.
4. The Sub-Committee agreed that it would report to the next Executive Committee meeting on 15 June that options were being reviewed and that a report would be brought to a subsequent meeting of the Committee.

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