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14 March 1996

Mr. Sean O hUiginn
Second Secretary
Anglo-Irish Division
Department of Foreign Affairs

COPY TO:	EC
PST	14/3
PSS	
MR. P TEAHON	
MR. S. DONLON	
MR. T DALTON	

Dear Second Secretary

Reactivation of NI Grand Committee

My note of 7 March on this subject and earlier reports refer.

I have been told by Peter Bell, who heard it for the first time at a meeting with Ministers this morning, that a decision has been taken to reactivate the Northern Ireland Grand Committee at Westminster.

The Northern Ireland Whip, who took part in this morning's discussion, informed the Secretary of State that a meeting has been arranged for Thursday 21 March for the purpose of discussing hospital services in Northern Ireland. (It will be recalled that this was the subject recently proposed by Martin Smyth for the Committee). The members of the Committee for next week's meeting have been designated.

The Whip told the Secretary of State that he had been approached by John Hume and Eddie McGrady, who voiced their extreme displeasure at what they regard as the furtherance of an integrationalist agenda, complained at the timing of this decision and emphasised that such steps should not be taken outside the context of a three-stranded talks process.

I expressed surprise to Bell at the decision and recalled his undertaking to keep us informed of developments. He replied that the Secretary of State himself seemed surprised when informed of it by the Whip (I found this somewhat improbable). I reiterated the deep misgivings which it would inspire and I strongly supported the SDLP's point about the timing of the decision. It was difficult, indeed, to imagine worse timing, given the SDLP's deepening suspicions about British Government intentions. This would come across to them as a "quadruple whammy" - first an election, then a forum, then (judging from today's media) the wrong kind of electoral system and, to top it all, a further concession to the UUP's integrationist agenda.

Bell apologised for the suddenness of the news. It had surprised him also and he would be taking up with his colleagues their failure to give him advance notice. He emphasised, however, that this is very much a matter for Parliament and that the NIO would not be automatically informed of it (again, I found this improbable).

Bell stressed the infrequency of the Grand Committee's meetings. The Committee was inaugurated in 1975. The word "Grand" was added to its title in order to distinguish it from the newly formed NI Select Affairs Committee. It is activated by a business motion normally made by the Leader of the House of Commons. Though it met fairly frequently in its early days, it fell into disuse in 1985 when Unionist politicians withdrew from contact with British Ministers in protest at the Anglo-Irish Agreement. It was revived in 1991 when it debated a draft Fair Employment (Amendment) Order and a draft Electricity (NI) Order. It met once again in 1994 to debate a draft Children (NI) Order.

The Grand Committee consists of all sitting NI members plus up to 25 other MP s nominated by the Committee of Selection for each meeting. It is, in other words, reconstituted each time a matter is referred to it. The 25 other MP s roughly reflect the share of seats held by non-NI parties in the Commons. The Committee is chaired by a member appointed by the Speaker from his panel of Chairmen. Its remit is to discuss any "specified matter or matters relating exclusively to Northern Ireland". It cannot consider any matters which are not referred to it.

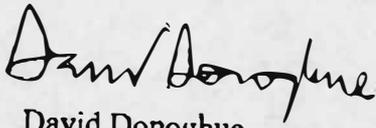
I have requested a full briefing on the Committee, its terms of reference and mode of operation, the background to the decision to reactivate it and the reason why Ministers saw fit to call the agreed three-stranded approach of the two Governments into question in this way and to preempt the possible outcome of the all-party talks. I also asked whether there are plans for further meetings of the Committee beyond next week's; whether it is envisaged

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that (as recently introduced for the Scottish and Welsh Committees) Ministers will take part in its work; and whether any other strengthening of its role is being contemplated.

Bell is to return to me on these points. He also supplied the attached material listing previous meetings of the Committee and comparing its powers with that of the Scottish and Welsh Committees.

Yours sincerely



David Donoghue
Joint Secretary