



House of Commons
Northern Ireland Affairs
Committee

**The work of the
Committee in 2004:
Government Response
to the Committee's
Fourth Report of
Session 2004–05**

**First Special Report of Session
2005–2006**

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The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Northern Ireland Office (but excluding individual cases and advice given by the Crown Solicitor); and other matters within the responsibilities of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (but excluding the expenditure, administration and policy of the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions, Northern Ireland and the drafting of legislation by the Office of the Legislative Counsel).

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Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Dr John Patterson (Clerk), Hugh Farren (Attached Second Clerk), Dr Aileen O'Neill (Committee Specialist), Tony Catinella (Committee Assistant), Julia Kalogerides (Secretary), Jessica Bridges Palmer (Media Officer), Jim Lawford (Senior Office Clerk).

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First Special Report

The Committee published its Fourth Report of Session 2004-05 on 27 January 2005. The Government's response from the Rt Hon Paul Murphy MP, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, was received in the form of a letter on 6 April 2005. The response is published as an appendix to this report.

Appendix

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

Thank you for copying to me your report entitled "The Committee's Work in 2004", which was published on 27th January. I continue to be very appreciative of the Committee's work and can personally endorse the Report's overall conclusion that both the main Committee and the newly formed sub-Committee perform an extremely valuable role.

I would like to respond to three substantive points in your Report.

First, on the issue of parades the Report states (at paragraphs 17-20) that "the failure of the Government to engage in a timely fashion with so important an issue has given the impression of a lack of leadership and has been disappointing". I do not believe that this criticism is supported by the facts. As the Committee is aware the Government responded to the Quigley Report in a written ministerial statement on the 22 February 2005. This set out a package of measures aiming at improving rather than fundamentally changing the existing parading arrangements. The delay between the publication of the report and the formal response of the Government was a result of a wish fully to take account of the views of all stakeholders. In particular the original consultation period was extended to enable key stakeholders to submit a response. With the launch of the Committee's inquiry into the Parades issue it was deemed appropriate to examine its conclusions and recommendations before making any firm policy decisions. The subsequent report has been of much value in preparing the Government response, which was issued within six weeks of its publication.

The second issue I would wish to comment on is the Report's assessment of the Departmental Annual Report format (see paragraph 34 of Report). I am particularly grateful for the helpful comments in this area and I note in particular the Committee's recognition that the proof-reading has improved.

We have made substantial changes to the 2004 Departmental Report which have been carried through and improved upon for the 2005 Departmental Report. An important element has been to provide consistency in the structure of reporting, therefore each core function within the Department reports on performance using a standard series of headings, such as 'Looking back over 2004; Highlights of the Year; Looking forward etc'.

These presentational changes may go some way to explain the perception of a reduction in reporting on some areas of the Department's activities such as the Compensation Agency. For example the Compensation Agency entry in the 2004 Departmental Report contains 30% more script than the 2003 report.

The Committee also commented on the lack of information on some of the Department's associated bodies. Many of these bodies were created to provide public assurance of their independence, and we therefore judge that it could be counterproductive to include detailed reports on their performance in the NIO's Departmental Report. Where appropriate a reference to the body and its own annual report is included.

Finally, the Report (see paragraph 35) comments on the NIO's performance in meeting its target for handling Ministerial correspondence. It is clear that the Department needs to go on making sustained efforts in this area. As the report notes, there has been an improvement in performance (and figures for 2004 suggest that the gains made have been maintained); and this is against the background of a target for correspondence tighter than that of many Departments. The factors we have previously drawn attention to – such as the need to seek information from outside organisations in dealing with many cases – continue to hold true. There is also a rising volume of work to be dealt with in parallel, created for example by increased number of parliamentary questions and (more recently) Freedom of Information requests.

Nevertheless we acknowledge that more needs to be done to improve our record here further. Setting a target involving a few more days to reply to correspondence, in line with some other Departments, is of course one possibility, as the Committee's report hints, and would be more satisfactory in a proportion of cases where, because of the need to coordinate responses from a number of sources, the 10 day target is not a practical proposition. But we should be unwilling to abandon the present more demanding target unless convinced it would lead to an improvement in our service to Parliament overall. We shall investigate this further.

I trust that you and the Committee find this response helpful.