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PA

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John Ho

Mr Cooper

844/12.3/96

Thank you for your letter of 19 February about your recent discussions with the residents from Garvaghy Road, Portadown and wider concerns over the potential problems with the forthcoming marching season.

As you will know, this is a most contentious issue in Northern Ireland. On one hand there are those who wish to exercise their democratic right to march and demonstrate and on the other there are those who do not wish these marches and parades to pass through the areas in which they reside, because they believe them to be offensive. It is not easy to legislate for such problems. Whilst I have the power to ban individual parades and demonstrations, I would not propose to exercise that power without a specific and strong case from the Chief Constable. Banning a specific parade could cause more problems than allowing it to proceed.

The operational handling of parades is a matter for the Chief Constable. It is his decision as to whether a parade requires to be re-routed because of the likelihood of public order disturbances, damage to property or serious disruption to the life of the community. Such decisions are, I believe, best left to him. It is to the RUC's credit that in respect of the 3,000 parades which took place throughout Northern Ireland last year that only a small handful



resulted in disorder. Only some parades were re-routed because of public order concerns.

In respect of Garvaghy Road, I understand that the Chief Constable has met with residents and that the RUC has also been in touch with local Orange Order leaders in an effort to avoid a repeat of last years conflict. Regrettably attitudes on both sides have hardened, which does not inspire confidence, though discussions continue. I also believe other groups such as Mediation Network are involved and it is to be hoped they can assist others to find a solution.

We are, however, not complacent. John Wheeler and officials are examining whether there are any other avenues of approach. But the answer must lie with the various groups involved talking to each other and being prepared to accommodate views which do not coincide with their own. Failing that the RUC will endeavour to minimise the problems associated with individual parades.

*John Wheeler
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