



NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE
11 Millbank, London, SW1P 4PN
Tel 020 7210 6591 Fax 020 7210 0229

Mrs M A Price
Head of Vehicle Policy Group
Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency
B1 Longview Road
Swansea
SA6 7JL

31 August 2001

NUMBER PLATES – DISPLAY OF NATIONAL FLAGS

We spoke about this earlier today. John Ritchie also kindly provided me with a copy of your letter to him of 20 August, which sought his view on the display of national flags or other symbols on number plates. The Northern Ireland Office has an interest in this because of the political sensitivity (we argued against it when Ministers originally considered the issue), and I would like to register a number of points for your consideration.

We would be very much against amending legislation to permit the display of national flags or other symbols on number plates.

Since the Belfast Agreement came into effect, the issue of symbols and flags has been one of the most contentious areas for political argument. For example, the flying of Union flag from Government buildings is currently the subject of judicial review and arguments about the use of flags and symbols continues in respect of implementation of other areas of the Agreement. While allowing car owners to display the national flag of their choice on their number plates made less contentious, I have no doubt that this proposal, if published, would become a further issue for argument in Northern Ireland. Aside from the difficulty that would cause for us, this would also inevitably delay any proposed legislation.



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legislation could permit the display of any national flag, or perhaps the flag of any EU country. This would allow car owners in Northern Ireland who perceive themselves as Irish to display the Irish national flag, while others may choose to display the Union flag. This would be easier for us to defend than legislation which permitted only the display of the Union flag, but we would still receive complaints from Unionists – experience given that many unionists are very quick to perceive any display of Irish symbols as a weakening of Northern Ireland's constitutional position.

If legislation is unavoidable, we would prefer that it be as permissive as possible. It would be very much against legislation which restricted car owners to a display of specified flags or symbols, and in particular we would want to ensure that those in Northern Ireland who consider themselves Irish could carry Irish symbol and flags on the same basis as those who wish to display the Union flag etc. The Belfast Agreement agreed by the British and Irish Governments and the NI political parties in April 1998 explicitly recognises "the birthright of all the people of Northern Ireland to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British, or both, as they may so choose," any legislation effecting Northern Ireland should not restrict or limit this commitment. The same wording was used in the British Irish Treaty signed at the same time as the Agreement that any legislation which permitted the display of the Irish flag, and any other Irish symbol, differing from the display of the Union flag or any British symbol would be likely to be regarded by the Irish Government as a breach of that Treaty.

For completeness, you may also like to be aware of a further provision of the Belfast Agreement on symbols, which states "all participants acknowledged the sensitivity of the use of symbols and emblems for public purposes, and the need in particular in creating the new institutions to ensure that such symbols and emblems are used in the manner which prompts mutual respect rather than division. Arrangements will be made to monitor this issue and consider what action might be required".

Signed

Robert Crawford
Devolution and Legislation Division

There are 4 pages including this one

Date/Time Transmitted: 22 August, 2001
12:53

Answer:
What do you think?
40317



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Department of the Environment

Fax Message

**Environment and Road Safety Group
Clarence Court
10-18 Adelaide Street BELFAST BT2 8GB**

Tel: 028 9054 1178 Fax: 028 9054 1087 Email: sandra.hinds@doeni.gov.uk

To: LINDA DEVLIN

**Address: MACHINERY OF GOVERNMENT DIVISION
OFMDFM**

Fax Number: 22262

**From: JOHN RITCHIE, ROAD SAFETY & VEHICLE STANDARDS
DIVISION**

Subject:

URGENT - NUMBER PLATES - DISPLAY OF NATIONAL FLAGS

There are 4 pages including this one

**Date/Time Transmitted: 31 August, 2001
12:58**

Anne
what do you think?
LD 31/8

URGENT - BY FAX**Memo**

From: John Ritchie
Director
Road Safety & Vehicle Standards Division
Clarence Court
10-18 Adelaide Street
BELFAST BT2 8GB

Your ref:
Our ref:

Tel: 028 9054 0843 **Fax:** 028 9054 0043
Email: john.ritchie@doeni.gov.uk

cc: Linda Devlin, OFMDFM
Maureen Price, DVLA Swansea
Brendan Magee, DVLNI
David Walker, O/R
Stirling Stewart

Date: 31 August 2001

To: Robert Crawford
Constitution Division
NIO, London

NUMBER PLATES - DISPLAY OF NATIONAL FLAGS

I am passing the attached letter to you as the requirements for vehicle number plates in the UK are provided for by UK wide regulations under the Vehicle Excise and Registration Act 1994 and are made by the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions.

Consequently the matter of the appropriate flag or emblem representing Northern Ireland to be permitted on number plates is one on which NIO may wish to advise. Please respond direct to Mrs Price.

I understand from Mrs Price that since her letter was issued, matters have moved quickly and Mr Spellar intends to make an announcement on his Department's plans in this area very shortly.

I am copying the correspondence to Linda Devlin in OFMDFM for information (and/or comment) and should be interested in being copied any further correspondence on this subject.

JOHN RITCHIE

31 August, 2001 12:55

SH


Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency

Vehicle Policy Group

 B1
 Longview Road
 Swansea
 SA6 7JL

 Mr J Ritchie
 Department for Environment for Northern Ireland
 Vehicle Licensing Central Office
 County Hall
 Coleraine
 Northern Ireland
 BT51 3HS

 Telephone 01792 782053
 Fax 01792 782056
 GTN 1213 2053
 Email
 Web Site <http://www.dvla.gov.uk>

 Your reference:
 Our reference:

Date: 20 August 2001

*Renewed
29/8/01*
NUMBER PLATES - DISPLAY OF NATIONAL FLAGS

I am writing to seek your views on the display of national flags or symbols on number plates. It may be helpful if I explain the background.

In 1998 the council of the European Union adopted a regulation (EC 2411/98) calling on all Member States to recognise the Euro symbol, accompanied by the national identifier of the country where the vehicle was registered, on vehicle number plates. This is intended to benefit travellers within the Community who will no longer have to display a separate national identity sticker on their vehicles. Some countries have decided to make the plates mandatory whilst others, including the UK, have made it entirely voluntary.

Our domestic legislation has been amended. The Road Vehicles (Display of Registration Marks) Regulations 2001 are due to take full effect on 1 September. Briefly, this new legislation will introduce:

2001 NO. 561

- A new mandatory character font for use on all new number plates
- A new size of character for all new non-motorcycle plates
- A new British Standard to make plates more durable
- A new format to replace the existing one in GB which expires on 31 August
- The optional display of the Euro-symbol and national identifier (GB)

The legislation does not however provide for any other symbols or flags. Indeed there has never been provision within UK law for the display of such insignia.



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An executive agency of the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions

When the Department last consulted on the draft regulations covering the display of vehicle number plates, a small minority suggested that the Welsh dragon, Cross of St George, Union Jack or Cross of St Andrew should be permitted. However there was overall majority support for the Euro Symbol. At that time the police reluctantly accepted the introduction of the Euro-plate but were adamant that displays of flags and other motifs should be outlawed. Their concerns centred on the ability of Automatic Number Plate Readers to read the plates. However since then there have been advancements in camera technology, which have resulted in improved readability.

The widespread display of the Euro-symbol is increasing pressure for a change in the law to permit national flags and other symbols. There is of course nothing to prevent individuals displaying symbols elsewhere on their vehicles. The thinking to date has been that the number plate is not the correct place for such insignia because it detracts from the number. However there is a view that if the Euro symbol is permitted in a specific area, there should be an option for national flags to occupy the same space.

The potential problems occur in defining what flags/symbols might be permitted and in what configuration. I realise that there may be particular difficulties in the Province and would appreciate your views on how/if these could be overcome in the event the UK Government wished to permit the display of national flags or symbols.

Kind regards

Maura Price

Mrs M A Price
Head of Vehicle Policy Group

cc Brenda Magee DVLT