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SECRET

MESSAGE FROM THE PRIME MINISTER TO THE TAOISEACH
DATED 24 MARCH 1972

I am sending you this message through the Ambassador so that you are fully informed in advance of the announcement that I will be making in the House at 1000 hours G M T

We have repeatedly made it clear that we have never believed that the problem of Northern Ireland can be resolved by purely military means. You will recall that when we met last autumn at Chequers Mr Maudling was about to launch his scheme to get inter-communal discussions going. But there was no move towards reconciliation, and opposition between the communities showed signs of getting worse. We therefore decided that a new and more radical effort had to be made.

At our meeting with Mr Faulkner we made it plain that these new and more radical measures were necessary in Northern Ireland, including the transfer of responsibility for law and order from Stormont to Westminster. The Northern Ireland Government were unable to agree to this proposal. We for our part decided that we could not acquiesce in the continuation of the present arrangements, and we shall therefore shortly be introducing a Bill to transfer all executive and legislative powers now vested in the Northern Ireland Government and Parliament, to a United Kingdom Minister and to the United Kingdom Parliament. This will be a temporary measure expiring after one year unless the Westminster Parliament resolves otherwise. The Parliament of Northern Ireland will stand prorogued, but will not be dissolved.

The increased burden which the transfer of the responsibility will bring means that it will no longer be possible for

- 1 -

SECRET

the Home Secretary to discharge these duties in addition to his many other responsibilities. A separate Secretary of State for Northern Ireland will, therefore, be appointed shortly and it is assumed that he will spend a good deal of his time in Northern Ireland.

The Secretary of State will appoint a commission of persons resident in Northern Ireland to advise and assist him. The aim will be to get people fully representative of Northern Ireland opinion.

We have also decided that it would be right in principle to bring internment to an end, when respect for the law and a normal situation of order have been restored throughout the province. After responsibility has been transferred, we will release as soon as possible those internees whose freedom is not now considered to involve any unreasonable risk to security. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is establishing immediately a procedure to review each case personally. If the measures which we have taken lead, as we hope they will, to a reduction in terrorist activity, it will be possible to consider further releases: but this must of course depend on a clearly established improvement in the security situation. As long as active terrorism persists and bombing and shooting continue, we must retain the power to arrest and intern those who there is good reason to believe are actively involved.

This Government, and its predecessors, have given solemn and repeated assurances that the constitutional position of

Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom will not be changed without the consent of the people of Northern Ireland. I know your own feelings on this matter, and I am grateful to you for your firm adherence to the principle that only through peaceful agreement is unification possible. We have decided that, although the provisions of the Ireland Act (1949) which require the consent of the Northern Ireland Parliament to any change in the border remain in being, it would now be helpful if arrangements were to be made for the views of the people of Northern Ireland on unification to be made known from time to time. We therefore propose to provide for a system of regular plebiscites about the border, the first to be held as soon as practicable in the near future, and others at intervals of a substantial period of years thereafter. As I have so often said before, I do not believe that any British Government would stand in the way of the peacefully expressed wishes of the majority of Northern Ireland citizens. Finally, although this cannot be assured, a plebiscite system should, we calculate, ensure a period of stability and enable Northern Irish politics to be concentrated on matters other than the border.

I do not pretend that what we are now doing constitutes the whole answer. Means must still be found which will ensure for the minority and the majority community an active, permanent and guaranteed role in the life and public affairs of the Province. Our immediate proposals are put forward and

SECRET

will be acted upon in the hope that they will so change the climate of political opinion in Northern Ireland that discussions can be resumed in an effort to reach agreement on a new way forward.

This is a difficult period - difficult not only for us, and for Northern Ireland, but also, I recognise for the Republic, and I would hope that I can now look to you and to your Government for all necessary steps to prevent trouble-makers from exacerbating the situation. The Protestants in Northern Ireland are having to swallow some harsh medicine: any suggestion that, in addition to changes at home, they must face imminently a change in their national status, or any suggestion that these changes are a victory for the I R A, will only serve to increase the chance of a backlash.

Such suggestions will certainly be forthcoming from the thoughtless, or the troublemakers, and in these circumstances I hope you will use your influence and authority to make it plain to all citizens of the Republic, and to all those in Northern Ireland with whom your words carry weight, that the only course that offers any hope for peace in Ireland is whole-hearted cooperation with the forces of law and order, both North and South of the Border. This does not mean anyone need abandon his views, but it does mean all must follow your lead in insisting that peace and justice in Northern Ireland is the immediate issue.

Finally, I am sure you will recognise how important it is that the action we are taking should be accepted by the

- 4 -

SECRET

SECRET

Protestant community in Northern Ireland and by public and Parliamentary opinion in Britain. In this context it is important that the Government of the Republic should be seen to be taking effective action against the I R A. I know that this is a problem which is very much in your mind and I hope that, against the background of our new initiative, there are some helpful steps which you will feel able to take.

- 5 -

SECRET