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Text of statement made in the House of Commons by Mr. William Whitelaw M.P. Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, concerning the announcement of a ceasefire by the Provisional IRA. Statements by other members, including Mr. Merlyn Rees M.P. and Mr. Harold Wilson M.P. are also included.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. William Whitelaw):
Mr. Speaker, I will, with permission, make a statement.

The House will be aware of the statement put out earlier this afternoon on behalf of the Republican Movement to the effect that

"the IRA will suspend offensive operations as and from midnight on Monday, 26th June, 1972, provided that a public reciprocal response is forthcoming from the Armed Forces of the British Crown."

As the purpose of Her Majesty's Forces in Northern Ireland is to keep the peace, if offensive operations by the IRA in Northern Ireland cease on Monday night Her Majesty's Forces will obviously reciprocate.

Mr. Merlyn Rees: Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that we welcome that is an understatement - the news of the cease-fire? I note the right hon. Gentleman's response concerning the role of the Army. Is he aware that, whatever the problems that remain, an end to violence in Northern Ireland is something that all of us in the House have longed for and worked for for some years? Undoubtedly, it is one result of the Government's change of policy of March of this year, particularly the change on internment. Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that it confirms what my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition told leaders of the Provisionals in Dublin in March, that violence would achieve no political objectives in Northern Ireland and that there must be a political solution in the end?

Is the right hon. Gentleman further aware that, in our view, the final decisions that must follow must be taken by and through all the people of Northern Ireland, and that free elections are vital to realistic political dialogue? Would he agree that the words of the elected Prime Minister of Eire, published only a day ago, are very relevant now, when he speaks of "peace and reconciliation" and when he asserts that the Protestants of the North cannot be governed without their consent?

Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that his announcement marks a turning point in the affairs of Northern Ireland and that he will continue to have the benefit of the support of all of us on the Opposition side of the House?

Mr. Whitelaw: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I have always said that the first objective is a cessation of violence; upon that, everything else must depend. Many grave difficulties lie ahead, but the first essential is that the violence should end, and I trust that it will as from midnight on Monday night.

I welcome what the hon. Gentleman has said about Mr. Lynch's statement. It confirms the assurances given to the majority community

in Northern Ireland by both sides of the House about their position as citizens of the United Kingdom for as long as is their wish, and I welcome what Mr. Lynch has said.

I also accept what the hon. Gentleman says about the need for elections and the need for the future of Northern Ireland to be worked out on the basis of elected representatives. Indeed, I am grateful to him for all that he has said.

Mr. Stratton Mills: How does my right hon. Friend intend to test the permanence of the IRA truce moves? While I welcome the announcement that has been made, may I warn that very great caution should be exercised? Will my right hon. Friend give the reasons, in his view, why the IRA have taken this particular turn? In particular, will my right hon. Friend deal with the detailed response of the Army, to which he referred in his announcement, and give a guarantee that no action will be taken which would in any way endanger the security of Northern Ireland.

Finally, on the political side, may I very strongly urge my right hon. Friend to fix a date so that we can press on with the referendum procedure, ideally at the beginning of September?

Mr. Whitelaw: I certainly give my hon. Friend the assurance that there is no question of any security forces not being constantly determined to protect the security of Northern Ireland. I think I am entitled to say that if the violence stops that makes a very profound difference to the whole security position in Northern Ireland.

I also note what my hon. Friend has said about the referendum. Mr. Faulkner made the same point to my colleagues and me. The Government will most certainly consider this point very carefully indeed.

As to why the IRA has decided to take the action that it has, that is a matter for the IRA and not for me. I can only say that I have consistently said for three months that I believed that if one could detach the main Catholic community from the terrorists this would be the end. I trust that it may well be. That has always been my purpose.

Mr. Rose: Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that his statement will be warmly welcomed on all sides of the House? Is he further aware that it is an indication of his wisdom in carrying out his policy over recent weeks?

In view of the very fruitful discussions which the right hon. Gentleman had recently with Mr. Hume and Mr. Devlin of the Social Democratic and Labour Party, would he begin to prepare the groundwork for the roundtable conference to represent all shades of opinion and points of view in Northern Ireland with a view to peaceful progress, both economically and politically?

Mr. Whitelaw: Regarding the discussions on a conference, I had some talk with Mr. Faulkner about that this week. I shall talk to other parties with elected representatives about this conference to see how soon it can be mounted.

Mr. Thorpe: Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that this is a positive and helpful development, which we welcome? As his good intentions are not in doubt - and I do not ask him to give a positive reply at this stage - is he aware that many of us hope that in the light of this there may be a far more rapid phasing out, or continued phasing out, of internment, and a rapid review of the Special Powers Act?

With regard to the "no-go" areas, would the right hon. Gentleman agree that it is probably far better to leave that problem to the pressure of public opinion, even those areas which are now clearly in favour of peace, rather than adopt any policy of patrolling or policing, which at best might be misunderstood and at worst might be exploited as provocation?

Mr. Whitelaw: In answer to the right hon. Gentleman's first two points, I note what he has said. He will have noted - this is a very important factor in the statement - that there were no conditions of that sort attached to the statement that has been made. That is extremely important from the British Government's point of view. As for the question of "no-go" areas, once there is a ceasefire, let me proceed as I believe it to be best. I wish to see the ceasefire first. I have my own views as to how I shall proceed thereafter.

Rev. Ian Paisley: Will the Secretary of State define a little more clearly, in order that the majority people of Northern Ireland will be under no misapprehension, the question of the reciprocation of the IRA truce? Is he aware that yesterday the Eire Broadcasting Company broadcast a very vicious statement issued by the IRA, saying that the IRA had entered into personal negotiations with him and that it had been given certain concessions? Does the Secretary of State realise that this does not help the majority of the population in Northern Ireland at present, when things seem to be in the melting pot?

Would he also assure the House about the people who are wanted by the security forces? Is he aware that in my constituency the security forces have evidence on a number of men who have shot in cold blood the sergeant at Toome Bridge, murdered the woman in Ballymoney and, on Monday of this week, attempted to murder four policemen in Ballymena? Will the right hon. Gentleman assure the House that, whatever his statement means, it does not mean that there will be any let-up by the security forces in seeking out those who have committed such dastardly and wicked crimes?

Will the right hon. Gentleman also tell us something about the conditions he has arranged about prisoners in the Crumlin Road prison? There have been such conflicting statements about this matter that it would help to clarify the situation if we knew from the Secretary of State at the Dispatch Box what the conditions are concerning certain prisoners in Crumlin Road prison.

Mr. Whitelaw: I have made the position of the security forces absolutely clear. I am not responsible for any statement in the Irish news. I have not had personal contact. I have made that perfectly clear.

Regarding the arrangements that I have made about prisoners in the Crumlin Road prison, I should make it clear that these arrangements which I made in a difficult prison situation, are in line with what is already carried out in the special security wings at Leicester and Parkhurst prisons. I think that those remarks answer the hon. Gentleman's points.

Mr. McNamara: Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that he deserves the good wishes and support not only of the House for what he has done over the past few months in this difficult situation but of the parents of many of our soldiers who have been fighting in Northern Ireland in that peace has also been brought to their families?

Now that we have the ceasefire, will the right hon. Gentleman give us some indication of his plans for the reform of the social

fabric amongst all communities so that those terrible sores that existed before this trouble started, which in many ways were a cause of it, will be completely eradicated?

Mr. Whitelaw: The law-abiding citizens of Northern Ireland have had more than their fill of violence. Many British soldiers have been tragically killed. It is of the greatest importance that no one inside or outside the House should do anything which might prejudice the ending of violence on Monday night. We have not yet got the end of violence. The House should understand that there may be considerable difficulties in the enforcement of the cease-fire. I should not like to predict exactly what will happen. At this stage we have to be cautious in being sure how it will work. It is a start to the ending of violence; at least, I certainly pray that it is.

Mr. Kilfedder: Will my right hon. Friend explain a misapprehension from which I appear to suffer? I understood that the Army was in Northern Ireland also to assist the civil authorities to search out and capture the thugs who have gunned down and murdered innocent people. I should like an assurance that the Army will search out these wanted men and bring them to justice.

Regarding the treatment of certain prisoners in the Crumlin Road gaol, Belfast, does my right hon. Friend agree that he is introducing a concept which is alien to our penal practice in that the special privileges given to those in high security risk prisons which he mentioned in England are not the same as the privileges being, or about to be, granted to IRA gunmen and others in Belfast prisons?

Mr. Whitelaw: On the last point, I have checked and understand that that is the situation. On my hon. Friend's first point, I have always understood that the purpose of the British troops in Northern Ireland was to keep the peace, and in that process it was right to root out the gunmen and pursue the terrorists. However, their job was to keep the peace. If there is an end of violence and the peace is kept, surely that must be what the people of Northern Ireland want.

Mr. Orme: Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that many of us are surprised that there is not complete acceptance of the statement made this afternoon? That statement has been made without any pressure or concessions. Surely all hon. Members recognise that this is a positive step forward. Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that some of us only hope that the Protestant community will have leaders at the negotiating table who will truly represent them and that the actions, for instance, of the SDLP and the manner in which it has conducted itself recently will bring it to the negotiating table in an open manner? Will the right hon. Gentleman tell us what immediate plans he has, if the ceasefire proves to be positive, for phasing out internment?

Mr. Whitelaw: On the hon. Gentleman's first point, it is right and important to say that the majority community in Northern Ireland has been extremely long-suffering. It has seen its country destroyed in front of its eyes and life made extremely difficult over many years. It has borne this with great restraint and patience, and I am sure that the House and everyone else commends it. I believe that the people of Northern Ireland, like everybody else, will pray urgently that this really will mean an end of the violence. I know that is what they want. I know, as my hon. Friends have been expressing this afternoon, that that is what everybody in Northern Ireland desperately wants.

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I welcome the chance to say again to the hon. Gentleman that this statement has been made without the sort of conditions that might have been attached to it. I should also say that, for the future, everything must await the outcome of the ceasefire and whether we get a genuine end to violence.

Mr. Harold Wilson: Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that the warm welcome which has been given to his announcement includes to not a little extent a feeling of personal pleasure for his sake, recognising the acute difficulties which he has had to face and the almost in-supportable pressures which he has had to put up with from all sides in this matter? Is he aware that all of us wish to endorse his concluding words and hope that this important step forward - it is only a step - will lead to something more lasting and assured?

Will the right hon. Gentleman also include in the tribute which he has paid those minority parties in Northern Ireland which are uncommitted, not only the SDLP, which obviously played a part, but the NILP and some of the other independent parties in Northern Ireland, without whose help perhaps it would not have been possible to make this statement?

Finally, does the right hon. Gentleman agree that this matter, like the act of direct rule, will, when people have realised its significance, call for a fundamental re-think about a lot of attitudes into which people have been frozen? Many people in Northern Ireland have said that they could not begin to move in this or that direction until they had some assurance of peace? If peace is now assured, could not this begin to change some of the attitudes that have stood in the way of a settlement.

Mr. Whitelaw: I am extremely grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his generous personal reference. I must admit that the tensions inside me in my job are very great indeed, so I appreciate his reference all the more. Indeed, so does my wife, who has been in Northern Ireland a great deal of the time. I am grateful for what the right hon. Gentleman has said.

As for the people to whom tributes should be paid if the ceasefire works, there are a great many people in all parties, including church leaders, who have made contributions. If it works - these are very early days to be saying this - one thing which has caused me the greatest grief is the part played by the British Forces, who have borne grave difficulties, have undertaken difficult tasks and had, I regret to say, all too many casualties, which I find I mind very much indeed. On all those matters I agree with the right hon. Gentleman.

We must wait and see what attitudes will emerge in the future. These are early days and we have yet to get the end of the violence. Once we get that, a great many changes of attitude and outlook will come. However, the first thing is to see the end of the violence.