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24th March, 1972.

Text of statement made by the British Prime Minister Mr. Edward Heath M.P. in the British House of Commons regarding Northern Ireland.

This House has debated the affairs of Northern Ireland on many occasions in recent months. All of us in this House deplore the grievous suffering inflicted upon its innocent people by the continuing campaign of lawless terrorism and we admire the steadfastness with which they have attempted to sustain the life of the Province.

Throughout this period Her Majesty's Government have maintained close consultation with the Northern Ireland Government. We have made repeated attempts with all concerned to promote discussions to find an agreed solution to the problems of Northern Ireland.

At a meeting which my right hon. Friends the Home Secretary, the Lord President, the Defence Secretary and I had with the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister of Northern Ireland on 22nd March we made it plain that in the British Government's view new and more radical measures were necessary if there was to be any prospect of breaking out of this deadlock.

We made three main proposals. First, in the hope of taking the Border out of the day-to-day political scene, and as a reassurance that there would be no change in the Border without the consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland, we proposed periodic plebiscites on this issue.

Second, we proposed that a start should be made on phasing out internment.

Third, we were concerned about the present division of responsibility for law and order between Belfast and Westminster whereby control remains largely with the Northern Ireland Government while operational responsibility rests mainly with the British Army and, therefore, with the United Kingdom Government. This responsibility is not merely domestic; it is a matter of international concern as well.

We were also well aware that the control of law and order was a divisive issue in Northern Ireland, and we thought that there would be advantage in seeking to take it out of domestic politics in Northern Ireland, at any rate for a time. We therefore told the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister of Northern Ireland that we had reached the conclusion that responsibility for law and order in Northern Ireland should be transferred to Westminster.

The first two of our proposals were in principle acceptable to the Northern Ireland Government. But Mr. Faulkner told us that his Government could not accept proposals for the transfer of responsibility for law and order from Stormont to Westminster. At a further meeting yesterday evening he confirmed, after having consulted his Cabinet, that this was its unanimous view, and that if any such proposal were implemented, it would entail the resignation of the Northern Ireland Government.

The United Kingdom Government remain of the view that the transfer of this responsibility to Westminster is an indispensable condition for progress in finding a political solution in Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland Government's decision therefore leaves them with no alternative to assuming full and direct responsibility for

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the administration of Northern Ireland until a political solution to the problems of the Province can be worked out in consultation with all those concerned.

Parliament will, therefore, be invited to pass before Easter a Measure transferring all legislative and executive powers now vested in the Northern Ireland Parliament and Government to the United Kingdom Parliament and a United Kingdom Minister. This provision will expire after one year unless this Parliament resolves otherwise. The Parliament of Northern Ireland would stand prorogued but would not be dissolved.

The present Prime Minister of Northern Ireland has agreed to continue in office until this legislation is passed.

The increased burden which this transfer of responsibilities will entail means that it will no longer be possible for my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary to discharge these duties in addition to his many other responsibilities. A new Office of Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is, therefore, being created. My right hon. Friend the Lord President is to be appointed to this office, together with the necessary junior Ministers. He will be empowered by the new legislation to appoint a commission of persons resident in Northern Ireland to advise and assist him in the discharge of his duties. It will be our objective to invite to serve on this commission a body of persons fully representative of opinion in Northern Ireland.

Her Majesty's Government, having assumed direct responsibility for law and order in Northern Ireland, will be no less concerned than the Government at Stormont has been to overcome terrorism and bring violence to an end. We shall do all we can to protect life and property in a part of the United Kingdom which is no less our responsibility than any area of Great Britain.

As long as active terrorism persists and bombings and shootings continue, and until respect for law and a normal situation of order have been restored throughout the Province, we must retain the power to arrest and intern those who there is good reason to believe are actively involved in terrorism and violence.

But a reduction of tension is the essential first step in the process of reconciliation. We believe that that requires that we should make a start in the process of bringing internment to an end.

We intend within the next few weeks to set free, subject to safeguards where appropriate, those internees whose release is no longer thought likely to involve an unacceptable risk to security. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland will establish a procedure to review each case personally.

If the measures which we have taken lead to a reduction in terrorist activity, it will be possible to consider further releases; but this must depend on a clearly established improvement in the security situation.

Thus in the matter of internment, as in the next matter to which I shall refer, we are giving effect to a proposal which we put to the Northern Ireland Government and which in principle they accepted.

This Government, and their predecessors, have given solemn and repeated assurances that the position of Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom will not be changed without the consent of the people of Northern Ireland. We have decided that it would be appropriate to arrange for the views of the people of Northern

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Ireland to be made known on this question from time to time. We therefore propose in due course to invite Parliament to provide for a system of regular plebiscites in Northern Ireland 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.

These plebiscites will be in addition to, and not in substitution for, the provisions in the Ireland Act, 1949, which require the consent of the Northern Ireland Parliament to any change in the Border. This position is not prejudiced by the temporary prorogation of that Parliament.

We hope that this arrangement, while leaving open the possibility of a change in the status of the Province if the majority so wish, will both confirm that no such change will be made without their consent and provide, in the intervals between plebiscites, a greater measure of stability in the political life of Northern Ireland.

These are our immediate proposals. But they do not in themselves constitute a lasting solution for the problems of Northern Ireland. We remain determined to find means of ensuring for the minority as well as the majority community an active permanent and guaranteed role in the life and public affairs of the Province.

Our immediate proposals are put forward in an endeavour so to 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 to this end. It is our intention, as soon as circumstances permit, to promote the necessary consultations about the future structure of Government in Northern Ireland.

Meanwhile, Her Majesty's Government will continue to give high priority to the rehabilitation of the economic life of the Province.

I would like to pay tribute to the determination with which the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland and his Government have sought to overcome the difficulties which have beset the Province; and the House will wish to acknowledge the spirit in which he has agreed to remain in office until our legislation has been enacted. We greatly regret that we were unable in the end to reach agreement with him. In the last resort, however, responsibility rests with the United Kingdom Government and Parliament; and Her Majesty's Government would be abdicating that responsibility if in this critical situation we did not take the action which we believed to be right.