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Stormont Castle, Belfast
June
3 May 1974

THE FOLLOWING IS THE TEXT OF A SPEECH MADE BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND, MR MERLYN REES MP, IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS TODAY:

We meet again following the recall of Parliament because of the problem of Northern Ireland and in the wake of a grave political development. The departure from office of the power sharing Northern Ireland Executive is a blow to all of us who saw it as a means for the two communities in Northern Ireland to live at peace among themselves. I want to look back at the events of the last few years before assessing the future.

The House will recall that following the introduction of direct rule in March 1972, the then Government embarked on intensive consultations with the various interests and parties in Northern Ireland about the political future of the Province. The Government of the Province had, for fifty years, been in the hands of a single political party, and there had developed in Northern Ireland a fundamental split between two communities - one perpetually in Government, and one politically excluded.

The old machinery of Government in Northern Ireland was not able to produce a Government supported, let alone accepted, by the whole community. It became increasingly apparent during the consultations mounted by the last Government - the Darlington Conference, the Green Paper, and so on - that the fundamental need in Northern Ireland was a new form of Government able to secure government by consent. And in the White Paper published in March 1973, and later in the Northern Ireland Constitution Act itself, specific and careful provisions were made for this.

There followed many weeks of patient exploration and negotiation, and although some Northern Ireland party leaders refused to take part, the leaders of the Unionist, Social Democratic and Labour and Alliance Parties were eventually able to reach

agreement on the formation of a new Northern Ireland Administration; shortly afterwards, the leaders of these parties joined the Government of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland in subscribing to the Sunningdale agreement, which was in some respects firm, and in others tentative in that it left matters for further negotiation. I believe that those who were party to this agreement were making an imaginative and important step towards resolving those problems and issues which are the concern of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Moreover, they did so without sacrificing in any way the basic principle about the status of Northern Ireland.

On 1 January 1974, wide-ranging powers were devolved to the new Executive in Northern Ireland, and direct rule ceased. Responsibility for law and order was reserved to Parliament and vested in the Secretary of State. The Executive had been in existence for a mere five weeks when the General Election was called. The result in Northern Ireland was a severe blow to its authority.

The Government in March experienced within weeks a vicious campaign of proxy bombing by the Provisionals. The extent to which the Provisional IRA were prepared to go was revealed to this House by my Rt Hon Friend, the Prime Minister, when on 13 May he told of the Provisionals "scorched earth" plan.

It has been the policy of successive Governments to pursue a political solution to the Northern Ireland problem. In my speech to the House on 4 April, I emphasised our continued support for power-sharing and for the Sunningdale agreement. Furthermore I sought to encourage genuine political activity and subsequently de-proscribed Sinn Féin and the Ulster Volunteer Force.

There has been other political action too. In the general election campaign which, as I have just said, added significantly to the strains on the month-old Northern Ireland Executive, much play was made in Northern Ireland of the Sunningdale agreement, with the agreement in many cases being misrepresented, and the fears of many Ulster people being cynically and unjustly aroused. More recently there was the damaging political strike in Northern Ireland called ostensibly as a result of a vote in the Northern Ireland Assembly in favour of the Sunningdale agreement.

I now move to the course of this sectarian and political strike - disowned completely by the TUC. On 14 May, the Ulster Workers Council called a strike in the Province. This group is a non-elected body of men that sought to subvert the expressed wish and authority of this Parliament through unconstitutional and undemocratic means involving widespread intimidation. I made it clear immediately that I would not negotiate on

constitutional matters with the Ulster Workers Council, although I was at all times willing to meet elected representatives, and both I and my Rt Hon Friend the Minister of State did so on a number of occasions. In the same way as I refused to be bombed to the conference table by the Provisionals, so I have been adamant that a sectarian strike by so-called Loyalists and backed by para-military forces would not force me to such a conference table.

The strike bore the ugly face of intimidation. The extent to which pressure was applied was illustrated by events on the first Friday evening of the strike. Extremists went on a rampage in Ballymena. Three pubs and a fish and chip shop that remained open against "orders" were wrecked. The Catholic owner and his brother of a Catholic pub south of Ballymena were murdered at point blank range. The RUC reacted swiftly, and 35 persons were arrested. 33 people have now been charged. It was this Ballymena incident that the Prime Minister characterised as the work of thugs and bullies. He was absolutely right in this description. This incident demonstrated the violent forces which emerge, and are the consequence of, a strike of this nature.

There was a progressive interruption in the essential services. As a result of this, and in particular of the worsening effect on the power situation, extra troops, including specialist technicians, were flown into Northern Ireland. The extra troops were used first to help keep the main access roads to Belfast open and subsequently to deal with road-blocks on other roads in the Province.

It was always clear that soldiers, sailors and airmen could only maintain to a limited degree the services necessary for the preservation of life, and that the extent to which this was possible was in certain areas dependent upon the co-operation of management.

The position was discussed with Mr Faulkner, Mr Fitt and Mr Napier on Friday 24 May at Chequers. No commitment was entered into. But the leaders of the Northern Ireland Executive asked for a limited operation. This request was considered by the Cabinet, and authority was given for it. It consisted of a plan to operate 21 petrol stations, 2 oil storage depots, and to supply petrol and oil to essential users and chemicals to the Londonderry gasworks. In taking this decision, we were moved by our knowledge of the facts in Northern Ireland, and the views of the Northern Ireland Executive who were responsible for the services affected and not by pressures from any individual politicians in Northern Ireland. This was an operation of a deliberately restricted nature. It was never more nor less than this.

Then there remained a decision on the timing of the operation. This was determined by the need for proper army preparation, by the situation on the ground, in the power, petroleum and other industries, which was changing from hour to hour, and also by a further security operation which was carried out on the Saturday night by the Army. The Army moved into the petrol depots at 5 am on Monday 27 May. They achieved total surprise and deserve the highest praise for the efficiency with which they conducted this delicate exercise.

The electricity situation worsened, and by Tuesday 28 May a serious difference of view had developed within the Northern Ireland Executive as a result of the external and internal political strains to which it had been increasingly subjected throughout the period of the strike. Mr Faulkner had reached a position in which he could no longer maintain the unity of the Executive. After consulting his supporters in the Assembly and the Unionist members of the Administration, Mr Faulkner felt that the right course was to appoint a mediator to negotiate with the Ulster Workers Council, or else he should resign. The SDLP members of the Executive were opposed to both these courses. The Alliance Party was in favour of a mediator but not of resignation. I made it clear that the Government could not be a party to negotiation on constitutional matters.

Mr Faulkner felt that in these circumstances the only honourable course was to resign. I accepted that resignation and the resignation of the Unionist members of the Administration. It was clear that in these circumstances there was no basis for a power-sharing Executive as envisaged in the Constitution Act, and that the Executive ceased to exist. It would be right for me to pay tribute at this stage to Mr Faulkner. No one could have fought harder for what he believed to be right; he earned and deserved total respect for his honesty, integrity and courage.

What caused the strike? I believe that in recent years a new form of Protestant nationalism has been emerging in Northern Ireland which culminated in the events of the past few weeks. It has brought together many strands of what has hitherto been regarded as Unionist opinion. There is no doubt that the events of March 1972, with the ending of Stormont by a Conservative and Unionist Administration, fed this development. So too have many other events. A period of direct rule; the Sunningdale Agreement; the advent of power sharing, not as a principle but on a basis which has proved unacceptable to a large section of the Protestant community; the frustration of apparently unending violence in all its forms, and not least the large bombs earlier this year in Belfast and other large towns, have all contributed. All these events have been deliberately misrepresented and exploited

by those who have sought power not on the basis approved by this House but by unconstitutional action designed solely to achieve their own domination. And all too many people have been prepared to be used for these ends. Too few have been prepared to stand up for constitutional processes and have lent themselves to unscrupulous and unconstitutional politics which have had no basis of concern for the people of Northern Ireland.

I should add that during the strike I was left in no doubt by industrialists, by churchmen, by establishment organisations of a variety of kinds that I should negotiate with the Ulster Workers Council. This view was also shared by the small Northern Ireland Labour Party.

The Government could not do that for it would have been an open recognition that constitutional matters had passed to the control of non-elected people. This was not an industrial dispute but a major political confrontation.

There must now be a breathing space by all concerned with Northern Ireland affairs. The Government must use it to find a further way forward, but others must make their reappraisals too. We all need time, and it is for this reason that we have used the provisions of the Northern Ireland Constitution Act to continue the government of Northern Ireland while no elected Executive is in existence. The Constitution Act contains provisions to enable us to carry on the government of Northern Ireland without damaging the fabric of the Act. By virtue of the powers in Section 8 of the Act, Ministers in the Northern Ireland Office will be appointed to be the Heads of the various Departments in Northern Ireland so that the Executive Government in the Province can be carried on. The Assembly has been prorogued by means of an Order in Council made under the authority of Section 27(6) of the Act. The arrangements are by their very nature temporary, and a new power-sharing Executive can be formed under the Constitution, if this should prove possible. In any event, short though the time available is, we must all use it to move forward.

What then of the future? The loss of the Northern Ireland Executive is a sad blow. The Executive represented a bold coming together of political parties prepared to set aside some of their differences for the sake of Northern Ireland as a whole. We should not forget the magnitude of the differences which they were able to resolve in their short period of government, including the major achievement of phasing the Council of Ireland agreement. I have already paid tribute to Mr Faulkner, but the House will also wish to join in paying tribute to the hon Member for Belfast West and Mr Napier.

I have already begun, and shall continue, the task of exploring the views of political leaders in Northern Ireland. On Friday last I discussed with them the principle of power-sharing. I was not attempting to set up anew the Executive; indeed I had the day before advised The Queen that the Assembly should be prorogued.

The hard fact remains that the Executive built up by the previous Administration, by the Rt Hon Gentleman the Member for Penrith and the Border, has ended. In the three months that I have been Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, I have made it my aim to sustain it and to work the Constitution Act of 1973 on which it was based. The political climate after 28 February changed radically and rapidly, but I am sure that the House will agree that it was right to continue this approach as required by the Constitution Act, even though it became increasingly clear that the Executive was unlikely to have the time which was vitally necessary for it to prove itself.

We now have to move forward in these circumstances. I do not believe that we have a long period in which to find the policy on which to do this. Firm decisions on future policy cannot be taken in the immediate future, but I put to the House some of the facts on which it must be based.

The first is that at present the Ulster Workers Council, backed by para-military forces, commands much support in large sections of the majority community, which is based on a new but ill-defined form of Ulster Protestant Nationalism. Unionism no longer means what it used to mean.

The second fact is not new but, after three months, I realize its force even more than I did before. Over the last five years, over 1,000 people have been killed. This includes 257 soldiers, 52 members of the RUC and 717 civilians. There has been about £120 million of damage to property. The bombings, the killings and the violence are sometimes carried out by children on behalf of the IRA. It must never be forgotten that there have been more than 250 sectarian murders, the overwhelming proportion of which were committed by Protestants.

Next and arising out of this are the methods of dealing through the law with those who bomb and kill. It is not possible to use the normal processes of the rule of law. There is too much intimidation and too much fear. I am bound to tell the House that I have signed two main groups of Interim Custody Orders since February. They covered both sides of the divide. I must also inform the House that there are many people in the Maze Prison who are there because they have

committed acts of murder and terrorism, often on a horrifying scale, on both sides of the border, but witnesses dare not, or will not, give evidence in public in front of a normal Court of Law. I tell the House simply that to have left these people free would have been to endanger the lives of innocent people. There would have been more explosions and fires in the large cities. There would have been more sectarian outrages of the vilest kind. This does not mean that it is not our intention to phase out detention in accord with the Sunningdale Agreement, but that very clearly was linked to the security situation. My P't Hon Friend the Attorney General will deal tonight with our proposals for investigation of the Emergency Provisions Act.

There are in the Province para-military forces in both communities with their splinter groups that cannot be dealt with by the RUC alone. Given the large number of weapons that still come into the Province, allied with the sectarian feelings that prevail, there are the ingredients for large scale murder. In its worst form it could be Civil War. The fact is that without the British Army the forces of law and order could not cope in the immediate future.

Then there are the facts of the financial and economic burden, and I offer these not in a threatening fashion. Northern Ireland is heavily dependent on the rest of the United Kingdom for governmental financial support, and this dependence has been growing rapidly in recent years. There is room for discussion about the exact figures: for instance, do you include loans? But the broad message of the figures is clear. In 1971/72 the transfer of reserves, excluding loans, was about £125 million; in 1972/73 about £180 million; in 1973/74 about £310 million. The estimated figure for 1974/75 is £350 million; if you add in the loan element the total is £430 million. This is not understood in Northern Ireland. People there say that they pay the same taxes as in Britain. Of course; but the figures I have just quoted are for transfers from United Kingdom funds, in addition to Northern Ireland's fair share of UK tax revenue. The proportion of UK tax revenue which is allotted to Northern Ireland is properly calculated in consultation with the Northern Ireland Department of Finance and takes full account of the profits earned by companies in Ulster. Northern Ireland will, it is estimated, receive £420 million from UK tax revenue for 1974/75. No deduction is made from this sum in respect of the costs of defence, overseas aid, foreign affairs etc. And all this leaves out of account the extra cost of keeping a large part of the Army in Northern Ireland and of the operations there, which is running at about £33 million a year. I should add that gross domestic product per head in Northern Ireland is well below the United Kingdom average.

In recent weeks we have all been faced with the "Protestant backlash" which appeared in the form of industrial action backed by intimidation. We cannot ignore that some members of the minority community aspire ultimately to a United Ireland, and, even more important, that all of them want, and are entitled to, a proper place in the life of Northern Ireland. In the past the conflict was between Republicanism and Unionism. The conflict is now not with Unionism but with Ulster Protestant Nationalism. But in the aftermath of the majority Protestant strike, we cannot ignore the feelings and needs of the minority, which power-sharing was designed to meet.

For the moment, in reporting to the House, it is our role to listen to all opinions, and this we shall do. It will be my job following this debate to meet and discuss with the leaders of all political parties in Northern Ireland and to consider the views of all those who have constructive views to offer.

I must make it clear that we are firmly against the often expressed populist view that we should pull out quickly and let the two communities fight it out, and that we should watch the result on television. I do ask, therefore, those who favour withdrawal to make clear their disapproval of this extreme view. I ask this because of my security responsibilities in the Province, and I ask it because of the effect it would have on the para-military forces. I must make it clear that the Government is also firmly against the integration of Northern Ireland with the rest of the UK.

The breakdown of the power-sharing executive must not lead to a period of inactivity. Time is not on our side. In the last two years there was evolved by the previous government a line of policy which we supported. We were right to do so.

For three months, we in the Government have made it our aim to support the arrangements devised by the previous administration. We did this in the face of a rapidly changing political situation. This Government must now find the way forward. Today and tomorrow we are here to listen, and we see this debate as the beginning of the reappraisal. We must then make decisions. It will be our hope to carry the whole House with us.

3 June 1974