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Extract from a speech by Airey Neave MP
(Abingdon) Opposition Spokesman on
Northern Ireland at a luncheon
given by the Ulster Unionist Council
in Belfast, on Friday 7 April 1978

"Margaret Thatcher has asked me to say how glad she was to meet members of the Ulster Unionist Council at the Conservative Party Conference at Blackpool last October. She continues to value the historic links between the Council and the Conservative and Unionist Party. If the Union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is to endure, it is essential that our Parties remain in close association.

Today's invitation from the Council provides an opportunity for me to express a number of views on the Conservative Party and Northern Ireland. A General Election cannot be far off and although final policy decisions have yet to be made, I am able to speak of fundamental principles. Many of these are shared by the Conservative and Unionist Party, by the Ulster Unionist Council and other unionist parties in the Province.

Foremost of these is the Conservative faith and belief in the Union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. While this is shared by many members of the Labour Party, another Socialist election victory in Britain would, in my opinion, put that Union at risk. In this Parliament the Left-wing have become a considerable force. Many are already luke-warm, if they are not actively hostile, to the Union. Although it receives little public encouragement, the "Troops Out" movement is not without significance.

I acknowledge the determination of Mr. Roy Mason to stand up for Ulster against these people of the Left. What I fear is the attitude of the Labour Party to Irish affairs when the General Election is over. A Conservative victory is vital to Northern Ireland; to its economic and political future and to the protection of its people from civil strife.

We are also faced with the old-fashioned campaign favoured by a mixed bag of Irish politicians, some American senators and some of the media, to declare that we will withdraw from Northern Ireland. Let no-one in Dublin be under any illusion: the Conservative Party stands four-square for the Union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. In this they know they can count on the support of all unionists in the Province. Together we will uphold the will of the majority to remain part of the United Kingdom.

Throughout the present Parliament, the Conservative Opposition, Official Unionist MPs and other MPs from Northern Ireland on the Opposition side have resolutely affirmed the position of the Province as part of the United Kingdom. I pay tribute to Ulster Unionist MPs for their achievement in spite of the difficulties of present Parliamentary procedures, in making the Government aware of the needs of Ulster. We hope for continued cooperation and friendship with them.

We are still compelled to treat security as the first priority.

Since January, we have faced both a terrorist and a propaganda offensive of serious proportions. Despite the high level of arrests by the Security Forces, the first quarter of 1978 was a period when hopes began to falter. It was unwise and premature for the Government at the New Year to talk of "the turn of the tide" against terrorism in Northern Ireland. This is a lesson which politicians should remember. The massacre at La Mon was a terrible warning against over-optimism.

The Provisional IRA are boasting of their renewed strength and modern weapons. I am delighted that an M60 machine gun which they flaunted on Television has been captured. I hope that journalists will cease to describe the M60 as a "propaganda weapon" and stop criticising those who have warned of its potential. To the family of the soldier shot dead in the street, it is simply a weapon of sudden death.

The Easter belligerency of the Provisional IRA should be countered by swift measures. It is no longer tolerable for their so-called political front, the Provisional Sinn Fein to make public speeches threatening the United Kingdom with violence. The Provisional Sinn Fein is virtually indistinguishable from the Provisional IRA. A recent case has clearly indicated that individuals can and do belong to both. The Government should declare it illegal and charge its members, if they are thought to have aided and abetted terrorism, with belonging to a proscribed organisation. The people of Northern Ireland have had enough of terrorists masquerading as "politicians" threatening them with the overthrow of the State.

I asked the Government to take this action on 6 March. They said they were "keeping the situation under review".

The Irish Government is now engaged in a war of words with Mr. Mason, which for the ordinary citizen may have tragic consequences. Party rhetoric against the British presence is a traditional theme in Irish politics. What Dublin politicians call the "steel wall barrier" protects all the people of Northern Ireland through the presence of the Security Forces. They should remember that those Forces stand between the Republic and a civil war which could engulf us all.

In the United Kingdom, we do not forget those men and women who have died to prevent a far worse conflict, a greater bloodshed. It is upon the ordinary soldier and member of the UDR and RUC that the peace of all Ireland depends.

Ulster people should be on their guard against forces within, which seek to beguile them into demanding independence from the United Kingdom. Such unrealistic oratory may be music to the ears of those who seek their ends by killing.

Both Governments should now show determination and statesmanship. Empty phrases hurled across the Border will not solve anything. It is vital for them to show equal dedication to the defeat of terrorism.

We expect Mr. Callaghan and Mr. Mason to speak firmly to Dublin. They should make clear our resolution to restore order in Northern Ireland. The guerilla war must be fought with specialist tactics. I was glad to hear Mr. Mason say that under-cover operations had been intensified.

I hope Mr. Mason will soon resume talks with Northern Ireland parties on constitutional questions. It is his responsibility to provide a blueprint. Ordered political progress must be the touchstone of success for any Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

Events can change rapidly in the months preceding the formation of a new Government, but I will indicate the Conservative approach. Our ultimate aim has long been a system of devolved Government. It is unrealistic to contemplate this in the form of an imposed power-sharing Executive. There are those who demand this, as of right, but I repeat, it is not practical politics. I am glad to see that many political Parties in Northern Ireland have come to agree with me.

I have always believed that Northern Ireland needs a locally elected forum. It is better in the short term to concentrate where there is already some mutual collaboration between the two sections of the community: in the field of local administration. We are discussing a regional council or councils with substantial local powers. I think that the whole community could be involved through an appropriate committee system on which we are taking independent advice from those who have experience in Northern Ireland administration.

Such a council or councils should not be regarded as a substitute for eventual devolved Government. Full devolution will take time. This makes it all the more necessary to see that direct rule becomes much more responsive to local opinion. Recently Ministers have shown themselves surprisingly insensitive. While medical and police opinion on compulsory seat belts must be taken seriously, it is absurd to impose them by Order in Council when the Government cannot get United Kingdom legislation on this subject through Parliament.

With our Ulster Unionist colleagues at Westminster we shall continue to protest at the growing scandal of Northern Ireland legislation in Parliament. We will not have the Province made a Government Field Station for Socialist experiments.

I have been much disturbed to hear unofficial reports that the Government will not introduce a Bill this Session to enable the Boundary Commission to start work on additional Northern Ireland constituencies for Westminster. It is the Government's responsibility to do this and we shall press very strongly for the legislation. It would be disgraceful if the Government, after setting up a Speaker's Conference, which has now reported, were to drag its feet in carrying out its recommendations.

The Conservative Party submitted to the Speaker's Conference that on the basis of present constitutional arrangements, there should be 17 seats or thereabouts. We therefore welcome its recommendations. Like the Ulster Unionists, we had made clear for a long time that Northern Ireland should not continue to have fewer MPs in relation to its population than any other part of the United Kingdom.

It should be remembered that the Labour Party only became converted to increasing the number of seats for Northern Ireland when they were in danger of defeat on a vote of confidence in March 1977. Hitherto, they had been resolutely against it. Indeed, the Home Secretary, Mr. Merlyn Rees, then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, said in the House of Commons on 13 March 1976 that: "Even to talk about extra representation in this House is to fly in the face of history and cultural attitudes." We should not therefore be surprised at their reluctance to introduce this legislation without delay.

No part of the United Kingdom has rejected Socialism as decisively as Northern Ireland. Ulster over many generations has shown a deep-rooted attachment to the traditional conservative ideals now being reasserted by Margaret Thatcher: family life, Christian principles, and freedom of choice. Everyone should read her recent speech on Christianity and politics, where she says that the role of the State in Christian society is to encourage virtue, not to usurp it.

In education in particular, this Government has launched a direct attack on freedom of choice. It is doing its best to recast the educational system of the Province in a distinctly Socialist mould. Since June of last year, it has insisted that one uniform comprehensive system must be established, to cover all aspects of secondary education throughout the Province.

Opposition to the Government's plan has come from large numbers of ordinary people who are now flocking to join the new Ulster Parents' Union. Their feelings must be respected. The Government has been trying to give the impression that everything is settled; that the comprehensive bandwagon will grind remorselessly onwards in Northern Ireland.

With our Ulster Unionist colleagues we shall insist on a full Parliamentary debate on the future of Northern Ireland's education to ensure that the present system evolves in a widely acceptable way. How welcome it would be if this same debate could be continued within newly-elected institutions in the Province such as I have described.

Ulster is famous for the initiative, thrift and self-reliance of its people. Their qualities need to be fostered by Government policy if economic recovery is to be achieved. The salvation of the Northern Ireland economy lies in native enterprise and entrepreneurial skills. Since 1969 productivity has risen 8% faster in Northern Ireland than in the United Kingdom. At present, initiative is greatly hampered by excessive bureaucratic control and high taxation.

Mr. Concannon and Mr. Mason are obliged to operate within a general economic strategy which means that the Government tends to take back in the form of additional taxation what it has given in the form of grants to stimulate the economy. It will be the task of the next Conservative Government to release from their present bondage, the talents of businessmen and industrial workers in Northern Ireland, as elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

The excellent relations existing between management and employees are the envy of Britain. Northern Ireland has suffered less through industrial disputes than the United Kingdom as a whole and is an example to our people.

We recognise that the Ulsterman's thrusting individualism will not be enough by itself to restore Northern Ireland to prosperity. We realise that special measures may still be needed in the future. As Sir Geoffrey Howe said on a similar occasion at this hotel on 4 July last year, we accept that for the immediate future public expenditure per head in Northern Ireland must remain higher than elsewhere in the United Kingdom. The main weight of such expenditure must, we believe, be directed towards the stimulation of profitable enterprises.

The people of the Province have most bravely endured 8½ long years of killing and devastation. In 1978, they should receive more recognition from the world outside. I am therefore writing to the BBC, the IBA and other media, asking them to concentrate on the demeanour and achievements of the Northern Ireland people under fire.

The public should be given more positive news of the gallantry of those who seek to uphold the law in the RUC, the UDR, and the Army. To those in the media who say this is not "news", I would reply that the public are eager for inspiration. They have had their fill of this anti-heroic self-destroying age. They have seen terrorist criminals advertised as honourable soldiers. In Northern Ireland they have seen enough of the cruel side of human behaviour to last a lifetime. With the emergence of a new generation, there is a moral duty to present a more constructive, a more accurate picture of life in Northern Ireland.

It therefore lies with all of us, especially those in politics, to show our utmost resolution to restore stability and peace for the Northern Ireland citizens of tomorrow.

In many parts of the world democratic Governments have been forced to retreat at the point of gun. Democracy will not retreat from this part of the United Kingdom.

One thing above all is certain: we, in the Conservative Party, will defend the Union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland."