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Mr Murray

to Betty



Northern Ireland Office

Press Notice

Great George Street, London, SW1P 3AJ. Telephone Enquiries 01-233 4626
Stormont Castle, Belfast, BT4 3ST. Telephone Enquiries Belfast 63011

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7 April 1978

In responding to a question from Mr Stanley Cohen, MP for Leeds South East, asking how the Secretary of State proposes to make political progress in Northern Ireland, the Rt Hon Roy Mason, MP, said in a written reply today:

"The Government wishes to see established in Northern Ireland a new elected authority responsible for the administration of the great majority of those matters which most closely affect the lives of the people who live there but, as all the main parties in the House have agreed, that new authority must be one which both parts of the community in Northern Ireland will be prepared to support and sustain.

"I believe that within the basic principles of the framework for talks which I circulated to the leaders of the four largest political parties in Northern Ireland on 22 November, it would be possible to devise a system of government which would be both workable and inherently fair, and in which the political representatives of both the majority and minority communities could participate.

"I am ready at any time to discuss the setting up of an elected authority on this basis. I would hope that there will be a willingness on the part of the parties in Northern Ireland to make a positive response."

In a further question Mr Cohen asked Mr Mason whether he has any proposals to fill the gap between the 26 District Councils in Northern Ireland and Parliament at Westminster by returning to locally-elected control in Northern Ireland those matters which elsewhere in the United Kingdom are the responsibility of local or regional authorities.

In a written reply the Secretary of State said:

"Yes. The framework which I put to the main political parties in Northern Ireland last November envisages the establishment of a locally elected authority above the District Council tier.

"This authority's responsibilities would include the administration of a wide range of services including those which before October 1973 were the responsibility of County Councils or County Boroughs in Northern Ireland. The system under which the authority would operate would need to be acceptable to this House as a whole and, as has been recognised by all the main parties here, acceptable also to both sides of the community in Northern Ireland. It would therefore need to reflect the special circumstances of Northern Ireland.

"I remain ready to take part at any time in further discussion within the principles laid down in the 'framework'."