

# NATIONAL ARCHIVES

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*17 Murray* *Wally* *W. V. Murray 2/222*  
*28 2 80* *no see please*



# Northern Ireland Information Service

*28/2*

Stormont Castle,  
Belfast BT4 3ST  
Telephone Belfast 63011  
Telex 74163: 74250: 74272

Great George Street,  
London SW1P 3AJ  
Telephone 01-233-4626  
Telex 1918889

Ulster Office,  
11 Berkeley Street, London W1  
Telephone 01-493-0601  
Telex 21839

## STRICT EMBARKO - 2 P.M.

26 February 1980

SPEECH BY RT HON HUMPHREY ATKINS, MP, SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND  
AT ARMAGH DISTRICT COUNCIL LUNCHEON IN MARKETHILL TODAY

I have looked forward for a considerable time to the opportunity of visiting this famous city and of meeting the members of the District Council. There are a number of issues upon which I have no doubt you will wish to ask me questions later, but for the present, I thought you, as locally elected representatives, might be interested to hear of the progress which we have been making in the Conference on the Government of Northern Ireland which has been taking place at Stormont.

The Conference represents a first step on identifying the highest level of agreement which we can reach on a method of returning to the people of Northern Ireland more responsibility for their own affairs. You, more than most people, know how unsatisfactory the present arrangements are. You are the elected council but your powers are extremely limited. We all want to find acceptable ways of ensuring that more power can be exercised by elected representatives. It is important to remember that it is only the "first step". There will be many more before we can establish new institutions because it is vital to ensure that any proposals have wide acceptance in the Province, otherwise they will not last.

Already it has been quite apparent that the participants are engaged in thorough, responsible and business-like debate on a range of difficult and complex questions identified in the Government's Working Paper. There was originally some scepticism about the possibility of success for the Conference; well if it has proved anything the Conference has proved that no-one taking part wishes to see the Conference fail. And indeed, according to a public opinion poll, 84% of the people of Northern Ireland think that the holding of the Conference was a good and sensible idea.

It is clear to me that there will be a level of agreement between the participants on the matters being discussed. Of course I cannot say how high that level of agreement will be and that is why the Conference has a considerable amount of work

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ahead of it which it will try to get through as quickly as is possible. What I would like to emphasise is that the Government is determined to build on the level of agreement which emerges in due course from the Conference. I want to make one <sup>absolutely</sup> thing/clear. It is that the Government does not have a cleverly contrived plan in its own cupboard which it will bring out when the Conference reaches its conclusion. I and my colleagues in the Cabinet, are anxious to consider carefully the views which are put forward by members of the Conference and also the views that have also been put forward by groups who are not attending.

There will be continuing discussions with the participants at the Conference and others in Northern Ireland so that at the end of this process we shall be able to bring before Parliament proposals for the future Government of the province. The nature of those proposals will of course be greatly influenced by this process of consultation. We are engaged upon a genuine and determined effort to find a political way forward in Northern Ireland which will give to the people of the province hope of a more normal and more balanced society. Now some people may feel that the defeat of terrorism is a greater and more urgent problem. But terrorism is something with which we have had to deal for many years, which we are determined eventually to eliminate and which has nothing whatever to give to the people of Northern Ireland.

The people whom you represent have suffered grievously over the years from the effects of violence in the community. Those who have courageously kept businesses going and those who, in spite of bombs and bullets, have managed to turn out every day to work, have given proof of the Ulsterman's doggedness and determination.

I really do not doubt that in the long run this approach, this refusal to give in, will finally bring us through these bleak and difficult years. There must be a recognition that violence solves no problems; that only by constructive discussion and a practical concern to work together for the good of Northern Ireland can a decent and normal life be restored.

The terrorist of course has no political policy. As the events of the last decade have shown all too clearly, the terrorist has become increasingly devoted to violence and increasingly uninterested in the welfare of the community, or of any part of it. The City and the County of Armagh have experienced some of the worst terrorist atrocities in recent years, and still bear as great a burden of terrorist activity as any other part of the province. And all in aid of what? The terrorists do not have a political programme to put before the electorate of Northern Ireland so that the nature of their support can be judged. They are not fighting to create some new sense of justice in Northern Ireland - for there can be no greater injustice than the wanton death and destruction which they inflict on the community.

Death and destruction is all that the terrorist can claim to have achieved. Over the years he has progressively alienated himself from that part of the community that he originally claimed to protect.

He is a threat to the life of every member of this community and his victims have included people in all walks of life, of all ages, of both sexes, and of all religious affiliations. No-one's property and no-one's livelihood is exempt from damage.

It is one of the Government's priorities to rid Northern Ireland of this cancer. We are determined that we will continue to face up to the challenge, and to continue to do everything we can to bring an end to violence. I am certain, so is the Chief Constable, that given the support of the community we can achieve the isolation of the terrorist and his total rejection.

To do this we shall need firmness of resolve. There must be no complacency, and I can assure you that there is no complacency in my mind, in that of the Chief Constable or that of the GOC: we are all resolved that we must sharpen still further the effectiveness of operations against the terrorist. Our effectiveness in doing so is being increased by the highly professional work of the security forces in the Republic of Ireland: the terrorist has exploited the Border in the past, and will no doubt try to do so again - but he is a threat to the people of the South as well as to the North (the Provisionals have themselves claimed the intention of bringing down the Government of the Republic).

We have to recognise that the terrorist will remain capable of savage acts of violence and destruction. But we must all beware of the false attractions of simple, savage, responses. As some of you may have heard the GOC, General Lawson, say only last week, "as he looks to the future the terrorist has only one hope left and that is that we will make the mistakes from which he can benefit." We must keep a cool head - otherwise in our anxiety to crush the terrorist we will find that we have instead hurt him less than we have hurt the very community we are pledged to protect. As the Chief Constable stressed, also last week "we will not rush about blindly and stupidly, alienating the community, as our enemies would dearly wish us to do for their own propaganda purposes." He went on to say that the police would be professional: and they would be determined. That is precisely the balance we should be striking.

The task of defeating terrorism is not however something in which the Police and the Army alone can play a part. We all have a responsibility to help protect that community of which we are part. If there are criticisms of the way in which the forces of law and order go about their duties, it is absolutely right that these concerns are brought to attention. The Chief Constable stressed last week that he will be insisting on the highest personal and professional standards in his force. By the same token the policeman and soldier who daily risk their lives to protect the community are entitled to the support and help of that community. We all share in the responsibility for keeping the peace - and if we think that something more needs to be done, it is our duty to say how it might be done, and to lend our own weight if we can. It is in precisely this spirit that many people have volunteered to join the RUC Reserve or the Ulster Defence Regiment: that is certainly one way of making a real contribution but it is not the only one.

One particular step, very much in the limelight at the moment, concerns young people. It is inevitable that young people have high spirits, and that from time to time they will kick over the traces of parental control. This is part of the process of growing up, and we must be careful not to stifle it. But in Northern Ireland in recent years this youthful exuberance has spilled over into something much more dangerous - an all too frequent involvement of young people in disorder on the streets.

I am not talking here of those few young people who happen to have been drawn into the clutches of a terrorist organisation, but of the larger numbers who get their thrills from throwing bricks at policemen or soldiers or even at each other; those young people who get their kicks from stealing other people's cars. Such behaviour is deplorable in any circumstances, but it becomes overlaid with tragedy when it leads to death or mutilation. I am talking here both of the deaths and mutilation of young people themselves and of those who are sometimes their targets. As a society, as parents, as neighbours, are we really willing to accept that our young people should create such dangers for themselves?

We in Government have faced up constructively to this problem. We have concentrated substantial resources on the Youth Opportunities Programme which provides training facilities for unemployed young people. Indeed, by the summer of 1980 this Programme will have provided 7,500 places for young people unable to find work. This is an increase of 25% on its original target.

That is another area where responsibility can be exercised. There are others too: for instance, those who see faults in our security policy, or in the conduct of the Army and the Police, have a responsibility not only to point it out (and that is a responsibility) but also a responsibility to contribute to putting those faults right. That brings me Mr Chairman to the central point I want to make - the Government, the Army and the Police will all play their part in the patient, determined, cool, campaign against the terrorist: but we need both the understanding and the support of the community in what we are doing.