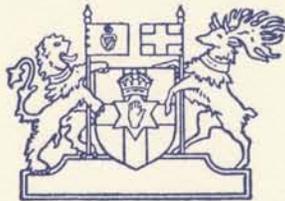


GOVERNMENT OF NORTHERN IRELAND

PRESS NOTICE



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SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER OF NORTHERN IRELAND,
CAPTAIN TERENCE O'NEILL, IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS,
BELFAST, ON WEDNESDAY, 29TH JANUARY, 1969.

I look on this as the most important Motion it has ever been my privilege to move from this despatch-box. Its subject is our Constitution, the very foundation of our State. The House will, I hope, agree that I seldom detain it with speeches of great length. But on this occasion I ask the indulgence of Hon. Members, for in developing this theme many matters of great significance must be drawn together.

But let me say this right at the outset. The defence of Ulster's Constitution has been the motivation of my entire political life. I have no other end in mind than the maintenance of Northern Ireland, in growing harmony and prosperity, as an integral part of the United Kingdom. In Ulster's defence I have had to use some methods which may be novel, and to move out of some old established positions on to new ground. The means have changed, as they always must, because the times have also changed about us. But let there be no doubt that the ends I have sought - as a Member of this House, as a Member of the Government, and now for nearly six years as Prime Minister - are those of Carson and Craigavon and J. M. Andrews and Lord Brookeborough; of all that noble company of men who went before us and who declared "For the sake of all the people of Ulster, the Union must be preserved".

I have worked to secure the constitutional status of Ulster on three fronts. First, against any threat from outside the United Kingdom. In the past this threat has taken two forms. There have been the despicable and cowardly attacks launched against us by unlawful organisations from across the Border, murdering policemen and other law-abiding citizens, destroying property, and attempting to achieve the wreck of our State by physical violence. We have always met those attacks with splendid resolution from the forces of law and order, and with dignity and forbearance on the part of the population as a whole. They have not achieved their objective, for they have always strengthened our determination not to be coerced. But we have also faced, in addition to this physical threat, a more insidious and potentially more dangerous campaign of political propaganda, aimed at discrediting us, and at showing to the world that it is we, the loyal people
/of Ulster, who are

of Ulster, who are the cause of strife and disharmony in Ireland.

And so I come to one of my actions which I recognise to have been novel and controversial: my invitation to Mr. Lemass in 1965 and the events which followed from it. By that action I wanted to establish two things. First, that the existence of Northern Ireland, its Parliament and its Government is a fact with which the Republic and its friends must reckon. The grandiose and empty claims of Eire's Constitution were exposed for the vanity they are when a Southern Prime Minister drove through the gates of Stormont to meet me as Prime Minister of Northern Ireland. And secondly, by showing that it was not we who represented any impediment to practical co-operation or a decent neighbourly relationship, we demonstrated to the world that it was not we who were in any sense aggressors. And so, when I met a wide gathering of Westminster Members last November, I was able to say to them:-

"What we ask in Northern Ireland is to be allowed to make up our own minds about our own destiny. That is enough. That is all we seek. We do not intervene in the domestic affairs of the South of Ireland. No terrorist bands from the North have sought to coerce the South. Leave us in peace, and there will be peace - peace in which the Governments in Ireland, North and South, may get on with the things which really matter."

And I was also able to say this to them:-

"But if such a relationship is to flourish, it demands sensible restraint and common prudence. You cannot go on talking business with someone who comes blundering into your back garden, kicking over the plants. Mr. Lynch can have a friendly relationship based on mutual respect, or he can have the luxury of allowing himself to intervene in the domestic affairs of Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom. He really cannot have both."

I want the House to understand that I do not regret for one moment the initiative I took in 1965. It was an initiative to clothe our constitutional status with a new moral authority; to make it clear to fair-minded people everywhere that it was not Northern Ireland stubbornness but Southern interference which hampered the development of friendship and mutual respect.

Secondly, I have set out to defend the Constitution here at home in Ulster. At all times I keep before me the vital words of Section 1(2) of the Ireland Act, 1949.

"It is hereby declared that Northern Ireland remains part of His Majesty's dominions and of the United Kingdom and it is hereby affirmed that in no event will Northern Ireland or any part thereof cease to be part of His Majesty's

/dominions and of the

dominions and of the United Kingdom without the consent of the Parliament of Northern Ireland."

That statutory guarantee which, as I have often said, represents the highest point of Lord Brookeborough's constitutional achievements, is our sheet-anchor; and I ask Hon. Members to note in particular its vital concluding words - "without the consent of the Parliament of Northern Ireland". Those words mean that it is we here, and our successors in time to come, who will determine the constitutional destiny of this Province. It means that as long as the Members returned to this Parliament are determined that we shall remain a part of the United Kingdom, our constitutional position is secure.

The implications of those words lie at the root of my whole domestic policy. I want to speak very frankly to the House. I know there are some Hon. Members behind me and others who support them in the country who look at the strength of the forces in this House both for and against Partition from 1921 to the present day, and conclude that no change of policy or approach is necessary to protect our Constitution.

But I want the House to understand that I am a Unionist, a convinced Unionist, not for today or yesterday but for the far distant future. I want our descendants to live, as we have lived, under the Union Jack and enjoying all the benefits of the British connection. And because this is my wish; because I want to secure the Constitution not just for our time but for the foreseeable future, I want to show every citizen of Ulster, every section of Ulster that the benefits of the British connection are for all to share. I want to see a day on which anti-partitionists will only be a tiny minority of eccentrics in this House. I know there are those who feel that a community which already represents over one-third of our population and has over 50% of the children of school age can just be written off as a source of support for our Constitution and status. I believe such an attitude is defeatist. I prefer to say, across the historic divide "This is your country too. Help us to make it all it could be."

If such an appeal is ever to succeed, we must build up some basis of confidence, and start to cut back the thickets of mistrust which have grown up for too many long, weary years. Our five-point proposals of 22nd November should be viewed in that context. They are based upon the principle of absolute fairness to all. That is a principle we all proclaim; how can any section of the community, or any vital interest of Ulster as a whole suffer from its implementation?

/And it is in that

And it is in that context, too, that I ask the House to view the forthcoming Commission, which is to consider those recent disturbances which have harmed us all, whether we sit on this side of the House or on the other. May I say that in concentrating on one, single issue on which the Commission may or may not express views, some of its critics have missed its main point? It is this. Each of us, if we are honest with each other, is to some degree the prisoner of his environment. On the one hand there are those who see recent events as a struggle between honest idealism and the forces of reaction. On the other there are those who see them as a cynical plot by radical subversives to overturn the Government and all lawful authority. Where does the truth lie? And who, outside Northern Ireland, will heed our partisan interpretations? I say: let the truth be known, and let us build upon it. I do not fear the truth for Ulster. The words "The truth shall make you free" seem to me to be politically wise as well as morally right. Let us create a glass in which we may all see ourselves clearly, and with a determination not to shrink from what we may see.

As I say, I want to build a new trust and a new confidence, which must come from both sides. And today I make a renewed appeal to the leaders of our Roman Catholic community. It is this. As I have pledged once more today, it is the declared policy of this Government that justice will be done and be seen to be done by all. Has the time not come for you to "render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's" - to observe the normal courtesies towards the authorities of this State?

And thirdly, I have sought to secure our Constitution in Great Britain. Carson and Craigavon did not fight to establish an independent, sovereign Ulster, but to keep us within the United Kingdom. That is our status today, and it guarantees, in the words of the Motion before the House, "immense benefits". Why is it that we enjoy by far the highest standards in this island? Partly, I have no doubt, because of our own enterprise and energy, and partly because there is concentrated in the North most of Ireland's economic muscle. But also, in very great measure, because Great Britain, our richer partner in the United Kingdom, so amply and generously supports us. It was not always so. The 1920 Act gives us, of itself, no guarantee of British standards. And the Colwyn Committee, reporting in 1925, asked the Joint Exchequer Board to have regard to "any lower general level of prices, of wages, or of standards of comfort or social amenity which may exist in Northern Ireland as compared with Great Britain". It was a great act of wisdom and courage on the part of our predecessors to decide that they would not accept such lower standards; that in declaring "Ulster is British" they would seek all the privileges, benefits and obligations of being United

/Kingdom citizens.

Kingdom citizens. But that end could never have been achieved without the generosity of successive British Governments. By Statute, by Agreement, and often just by informal arrangement between the Ministry of Finance and the Treasury, they have made possible the development of that modern State whose achievements we see around us.

But what has been given to us because we are British could be withheld if we fail to be British. In the last resort all this support rests on the continuing sympathy of the people of Britain, of the Parliament of Britain, of the Government of Britain. And although it is for Stormont to determine our constitutional future, how could we emphasize, as we have always done, the benefits of the British connection if such benefits were to be put at risk?

There are in my opinion two reasons why it is sometimes difficult for people to understand Ulster's position within the United Kingdom. The first reason is the simple one of nomenclature. British Columbia has 52 Members in its Legislative Assembly like Stormont, but there the resemblance ends. A member of a legislative assembly is known not as an M.P. but an M.L.A. Except in Ontario, with its vast resources and a population of over 7 million providing so much of the Canadian wealth, Prime Ministers are known as "Premiers", and most Ministers of Finance are called "Provincial Treasurers". In this way the distinction between the Federal and Provincial Parliaments is clear for all to see.

The second reason is the extremely complicated nature of inter-exchequer relations. These are, however, based on the simple British precepts of trust and friendship. The man who first realised that, though the Union had been in operation for 130 years and had given us the other benefits of British citizenship it had left us with an Irish standard of living was Mr. J.M. Andrews. It was he who challenged Mr. Pollock's desire that we should only provide the facilities we could afford within our own limited means and eventually won Lord Craigavon's support for the Reinsurance Agreement which has turned out to be the cornerstone of the British Welfare State as it operates in Northern Ireland today. From this also grew up the policies of "leeway" and "parity" which have conferred such immense benefits upon our people. Inevitably this has tended to restrict our theoretical freedom; but it was a freedom in effect to be poor relations rather than full members of the family. If this is what some of our critics want let me tell them that no responsible Government of Northern Ireland could ever agree to such a crazy policy.

Indeed it would be true to say that unless one has been a Minister of Finance in Northern Ireland - and all those who have will agree with every word I say - it is hard to understand all that is at stake. Where would a Minister of Commerce be who was unable to offer the industrialists of the world the same
/or even better

or even better incentives than those attached to a British development area? Where would a Minister of Agriculture be who could not help the Ulster farmers in the way the British Minister of Agriculture is helping British farmers? Who would last more than a few weeks as Minister of Health and Social Services if he had to say to our pensioners and old folk "Your Welfare State benefits will have to be reduced", or to our sick "We cannot afford to run a Health Service on British lines"? Where would the Minister of Development be if the vast expenditure on our physical development were cut or seriously deferred and what would the contractors and builders and their employees say if their firms went bankrupt and they were cast out of work?

A Government elected on the slogan of "Back to 1912" would have to go back in more senses than one, but as soon as our people realised that they had been defrauded of their British birthright they would turn in anger on those who had misled them in order that they could indulge in the easy luxury of slogan politics.

And now I come to a matter which has caused me great pain:- the views expressed by a former colleague. I hope he will listen carefully to what I have to say. I know he too supports our Constitution as I do; but I ask him to understand that a failure to face up to constitutional realities is in itself a threat to the status we value so much.

We are unique in the United Kingdom in that much of our Constitution has a written form. Certainly the 1920 Act, with its various additions and amendments over the years, is a vital part of our Constitution; and I would maintain that other Statutes, and in particular those governing inter-Exchequer relationships, are also constitutional in the widest sense.

But because Northern Ireland does not stand alone, but is a part of the United Kingdom, it is hardly surprising that there are also unwritten or conventional elements of our Constitution. The British Constitution as a whole is, to a large degree, unwritten - with no equivalent, for example, to the Constitution of the United States of America.

I have used the word "conventional", and although I am not a lawyer I would like to tell this House what I think a convention of the Constitution is. This is a crucial point, because my Rt. Hon. Friend the Member for Larne has dwelt at some length upon the convention governing the exercise of powers under Section 75 of the Government of Ireland Act.

If we are talking of a convention of Parliament, I think it means no more and no less than the prevailing and generally accepted practice of Parliament. Now Parliament collectively is a body with a great deal of commonsense, which normally chooses to exercise its immense powers - theoretically almost without limit - in a sensible and realistic way. In relation to the exercise of powers

/under Section 75,

under Section 75, Westminster has, I would suggest, acted with self-restraint because it would be clearly absurd to establish a representative assembly here with certain powers and then - for no good or sufficient reason - seek to override those powers. This has been the view of Westminster, it is my view and also I think the view of my Rt. Hon. Friend. Here, I take it, we are on common ground.

But I am afraid it follows, too, that if a convention is the prevailing and generally-accepted practice of Parliament, based upon what seems sensible and realistic to it, equally that practice can be changed if the will of Parliament itself changes. If one thinks about this for a moment, it is self-evident. However strong the force of convention - and many constitutional lawyers consider it extremely strong - it cannot be stronger than the force of the law. And since Parliament can amend its own Acts, equally it is free to set aside its own conventions.

But neither a statutory nor a conventional practice should be lightly set aside when what is involved is the constitutional position of another, albeit subordinate Parliament.

I gather exception has been taken in some quarters to the references to these constitutional issues which I made in my television broadcast. Now what, in fact, did I do on that occasion? I read the words of Section 75 of the Government of Ireland Act. The existence of these words in that Act is a fact. It can hardly be assumed that in reading Section 75 on television I was revealing some dark secret hitherto unknown to the Government and Parliament at Westminster. I went on to say that Mr. Wilson had made it clear to us that if we did not face up to our problems, the Westminster Parliament might well decide to act over our heads. And that, too, as all my colleagues knew before I spoke, is also a fact.

Now there is a type of political thinking which might be called the ostrich view of things. It is based on the idea that if you bury your head sufficiently deeply in the sand and refuse to face up to facts, they will mysteriously vanish. I do not myself think it is a very sensible view, and it is certainly not one I would commend either to this House or to the country at a critical time.

May I digress here for a moment to deal with the accusation that I have departed from the practice of my predecessors in this office? Let us dispose of this here and now. This is what Lord Craigavon said, in this very House, when his Government was accused of so-called "bowing to Westminster pressure":-

"We have reached the point when, if there is any honour left in us, or any decency in our conduct of public affairs, we have to choose whether we are going to do what is right ourselves or whether we are going to be cravens and

/leave it to the British

leave it to the British Government to come along and say "Well, if you will not do it, we must do it ourselves". It would be the most regrettable incident in Ulster's history if she would ever refuse to take on her own shoulders the burdens which we ought to bear."

These were the words of Lord Craigavon in December, 1931, and I ask Hon. Members to set them alongside what I said in December, 1968 -

"If we allowed others to solve our problems because we had not the guts to face up to them we would be utterly shamed."

And here is what Mr. J. M. Andrews said in March, 1943:

"In succession I have been Minister of Labour and Minister of Finance, and during the last two-and-a-quarter years I have been in the key position of Prime Minister. From all these different points of view I have had special opportunities of studying the problem, and therefore it may be thought that I speak with some knowledge of the subject In my opinion if we were to go on our own it would be folly."

With this digression, may I continue to deal with what I actually did say in my television broadcast?

I ask Hon. Members to note that I did not advocate intervention by Westminster, seek to justify it or say that it would be a good thing. But I did face up to the fact that it could happen, and that we would be wise in responding to current events so to act as to make such intervention unnecessary and unthinkable. For provided we continue to act sensibly and with evident justice I do not believe British public opinion would welcome, or British parliamentary opinion support a proposal for intervention.

But I do not want the House to close its eyes to the fact that the use of Section 75 is, in the fullest sense, lawful and that the restraint which Westminster has always exercised in considering its use is self-imposed. Some people seem to imagine that the Constitution of Northern Ireland consists of no more than a declaration of the powers of the Northern Ireland Government and Parliament. But of course the whole 1920 Act, including Section 75, is part of the Constitution.

I repeat that I do not want or welcome any intervention, and that is also the view of my colleagues. But when people talk of "resistance" they are on extremely dangerous ground. For what does "resistance" mean? In a matter so important we have a right to expect some clarity and precision of thought and speech. It is one thing to say that we would resent intervention; that we would object to it; that we would argue strongly against it. But just as Section 75 means what it says, so too the word "resistance" must be given its commonly-accepted meaning.

Now to talk of "resistance" in this context is both a legal and a practical absurdity. It is a legal absurdity because, as eminent lawyers have pointed out, Westminster legislation which is applied to Northern Ireland quite simply becomes part of the law of Northern Ireland. The Courts, the Civil Service and indeed all citizens with proper respect for law would be bound to observe it.

Of course if law is ignored or opposed or evaded on a massive scale, it has no real practical effect. But apart from the merit of any such course - and it has very little merit - any contemplation of it ignores the fact of our enormous dependence upon Great Britain. Not only do we receive financial and economic assistance on a very large scale, but the bulk of our taxation is actually collected by authorities of the United Kingdom Government which controls in our territory, military, naval and air forces.

Now some people will do doubt say - and have in fact said - that no such thoughts were ever in their minds. But those who occupy responsible ministerial positions have an obligation to see that the words which come from their lips are not open to grave and damaging ambiguity.

Unfortunately that is not the end of the matter. As I said in the letter which I wrote to my Rt. Hon Friend the Member for Larne asking for his resignation from the Government, I know perfectly well that he has toyed with ideas of a virtually independent Northern Ireland. He has not denied - nor could he deny it, because it happens to be true - that while he was still a Minister he had to be asked to remove from prepared speeches passages which sought to show, either openly or by inference, that Northern Ireland could stand alone.

Now I do not see how anyone in a Unionist Government could justify such an idea, or any thoughtful Unionist support it, because it is the very reverse and negation of Unionism, which came into being to maintain the Union and must always keep this principle sacrosanct. Craig in 1912 stood beside Carson under the banner "We will not have Home Rule for Ulster". Craig in 1968 stood under a more ambiguous banner. They cannot both be sound Unionists; and I choose as the sound Unionist the grand, shrewd, courageous statesman who political heirs we claim to be.

In any case, all this talk of constitutional crisis is now, I believe, beside the point. Because we have acted wisely, prudently, moderately and fairly as a Government, we have demonstrated that the responsibility for the "peace, order and good government" of this Province - in the words of the 1920 Act - can safely be left in our hands. Intervention was, at one stage, a real possibility. It has receded because some of us believed in wise action rather than fiery talk.

It has been implied by some people that my colleagues and I are failing to defend Ulster's constitutional position. Let me state very clearly that if Ulster's Constitution were ever truly to be in danger, I would be the first to defend it. But at the moment the only threat I see to our constitutional position is from the noisy intransigence of a minority of people who are unwilling to accept the facts of life in the Twentieth Century. After all the heart and core of our Constitution is that we are members, with Great Britain, of the United Kingdom. Emotive talk of "blackmail" ignores the nature of that relationship. It is true that the present Government in the United Kingdom is of a political complexion which most of us here do not favour. But let us not forget that it was a Government of that same complexion which gave us, in the Ireland Act of 1949, the vital power to determine here in this Parliament our own constitutional destiny.

And so, in asking the House to support this Motion, I rest my case upon the policies I have outlined, which are the policies of us all on this Front Bench. As this debate proceeds, my Rt. Hon. Friend the Minister of Finance will have more to say about the benefits of the British connection, and my Rt. Hon. Friend the Attorney-General will amplify, with all his knowledge and authority, what I have said about the law and practice of the Constitution. For myself, I end as I began. The defence of the Constitution is at the root of my policies, whether towards Great Britain, the Irish Republic or our own community. In voting for this Motion, I ask the House to endorse these policies, and to show the world that Ulster, whatever the unfair attacks recently launched upon it, is united as always in the defence of vital principles. I hope that today's debate will clear the air of many misconceptions. It has not been my wish, in what I have said, to wound or to attack anyone; simply to explain and clarify. I look upon this debate as a chance to bind up some old wounds, and set us free to pursue with vigour the course we have set ourselves. And let this message go forth this afternoon from the Commons of Northern Ireland: what our forefathers created, we will maintain. By guaranteeing to all our people the fullest benefits of British citizenship, we shall make our Constitution secure not only for today, but for generations yet to come.

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