

## STATEMENT BY SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

Friday, 5 March 1976RL

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1. I will, with permission, make a statement.
2. As the House will recall, the Northern Ireland Constitutional Convention was set up by Parliament at Westminster to consider what provision for the government of Northern Ireland would be likely to command the most widespread acceptance throughout the community there. The Convention was born out of a belief that the people of Northern Ireland themselves ought to have the chance to play a constructive part in seeking a solution to their own constitutional problems, in the knowledge that final decisions were for Parliament at Westminster.
3. The Constitutional Convention has had two distinct phases. The first phase lasted from May to November last year. As I reported to the House on 12 January 1976, the Report of the Convention submitted to me on 8 November showed agreement that there should be a unicameral legislature and a government in Northern Ireland with a broad range of responsibilities including responsibility for industrial and commercial matters. All the parties agreed on a number of other matters including the desire to see government responsibility for law and order devolved to Northern Ireland and additional human rights legislation introduced.
4. The Convention did not, however, agree on the central issue - that is, how, in a divided community, a system of government could be devised which would have sufficient support in both parts

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of that community to provide stable and effective government. As I told the House on 12 January: "experience in recent years has made plain that no system of government within Northern Ireland will be stable or effective unless both parts of the community acquiesce in that system, and are willing to work to support it." The proposals in the Convention's Report did not meet this basic need.

5. The Government considered it right, therefore, to reconvene the Convention to see if agreement could be reached on the specific and crucial issue of a system of government within Northern Ireland which provided for a form of partnership and participation.
6. There have been a number of meetings between the Convention parties since the Convention was reconvened. But it is now clear that no further progress was made even though new proposals were advanced by the Alliance Party and considered by the United Ulster Unionist Coalition. The debates which have taken place in the Convention and the resolutions which have been conveyed to me make it plain that there is now no prospect of agreement between the parties there. The reconvened Convention has already sat beyond the four weeks which, as I said on 12 January, should be sufficient for progress to be made on the matters referred to it. In view of the clear indication that further progress will not now be made, I have advised Her Majesty to dissolve the Convention, and an Order in Council has been made dissolving it as from midnight tonight and I have so informed the Chairman.
7. I believe the House will share the Government's deep regret that

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the opportunity provided by the Convention has been lost and that its members have not succeeded in their task of devising a workable system of government for Northern Ireland. My strongly held view is that there is no instant solution to the problems of Northern Ireland. It would be a grave mistake to pretend that there was one, let alone to rush forward with some new devices. It is clearly not possible at this time to make progress towards a devolved system of government for Northern Ireland. This still remains the Government's aim, but it does not contemplate any major new initiative for some time to come, though we shall always be ready to entertain constructive and responsible ideas from those in Northern Ireland who are prepared to work together for Northern Ireland. There is no question of a ban on legitimate political activities. The immediate need now is for a period of constitutional stability so that we can tackle the problems of criminality and unemployment.

8. There is no need for any immediate change in the machinery of government for Northern Ireland. In 1972 this House decided to take responsibility for the government of Northern Ireland and to bring to an end the Stormont Parliament. The short-lived Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly was brought to an end following the Ulster Workers' strike. The Convention has never been a part of any system of government. Direct Rule is already in being under the terms of the Northern Ireland Act 1974 and it will continue. I shall bring before the House in due course proposals for its renewal, including any changes that may be desirable.

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9. I want to make it plain that my firmly held intention is that Direct Rule will be positive and not negative. The Government will continue to discharge fully its responsibility for all aspects of the affairs of Northern Ireland and will provide a firm, fair and resolute government.
10. In particular, I would like to make it clear that the Security Forces will continue to do all that is necessary to deal with the security problems and to restore law and order. They will have the full support of the Government in bringing to justice before the courts criminals from all parts of the community.
11. Like the rest of the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland has economic and employment problems. We have yet to see the end of rising unemployment in Northern Ireland. The full impact of the problems that are facing the United Kingdom as a whole have taken longer to reach Northern Ireland than elsewhere. I want to stress that the Government are doing and will continue to do everything possible within the resources that are available to mitigate these problems and to promote employment. It is not going to be easy despite public expenditure in Northern Ireland exceeding £1300 million in the current year.
12. The ending of the Convention, which was set up by this Parliament, means that the role of its members has ceased. The House is already aware that Convention members will continue to be paid until 7 May. I intend to follow Westminster procedures as closely as possible. As with dissolution at Westminster, dissolution of the Convention will mean that Convention members

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cease to have any role as such. They will cease to have the use of any of the facilities at Stormont, but they will, of course, be able to clear up their papers and belongings.

13. I must place firmly on record a tribute to the work of Sir Robert Lowry, the Chairman of the Convention, who has been so ably assisted by his small staff. Sir Robert has, I know, been wholly independent and impartial. I am sure that the House will join with me in expressing our gratitude and thanks to him.
14. The people of Northern Ireland will continue, like citizens in any other part of the United Kingdom, to be able to pursue matters with Ministers through their elected representatives at Westminster. I and the other Ministers in the Northern Ireland Office will always be ready to listen to their representations on behalf of their constituents. They will be the normal channel of communication with Ministers.
15. The Government will carry out its responsibilities to the full and fulfil its obligations to all the citizens of the United Kingdom of which Northern Ireland is a part.