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NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY (DAY OF ELECTION) ORDER 1982

DRAFT SPEECH FOR HOUSE OF COMMONS

I beg to move that the draft Northern Ireland Assembly (Day of Election) Order 1982, which was laid before this House on 14 July, be approved.

The draft Order appoints Wednesday, 20 October as the date on which the election of members to a new Northern Ireland Assembly will take place. The Assembly was dissolved with effect from 28 March 1975 under Section 1(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1974, and the Order, if approved, will be made under Section 27(7) of the Northern Ireland Constitution Act 1973.

After many hours of searching debate, the Northern Ireland Act 1982 is now on the statute book. I firmly believe, as I have said before in this House, that the opportunity which the provisions of this Act offer for the people of Northern Ireland, through their elected representatives, to work out among themselves at their own pace arrangements for an acceptable form of devolved government, must be grasped. But the Act does more than that; it also provides the opportunity for the Assembly immediately to become more closely involved in scrutinising the day to day government of the Province. And with the urgent problems that face Northern Ireland, it is right that the voices of Northern Ireland's elected representatives should be heard as soon as possible, responsibly and constructively debating the main issues of the moment.

Despite the doubts of some who have spoken in this House, I am convinced that there is a growing expectation of, and a desire for,

progress in the Province. There has been much speculation about how the Act will work out in practice. But we should now put such speculation behind us and turn our minds to putting the provisions of the Act into effect at the earliest reasonable opportunity. That is why the Government has decided that the elections to the Assembly should be held in the autumn. The choice of 20 October is designed to strike a balance between allowing sufficient time for the Chief Electoral Officer and his staff to prepare for the election and the Northern Ireland parties to campaign effectively after the holiday season / on the one hand, and avoiding the approach of the winter period with its limited hours of daylight, the risk of bad weather and associated security problems, on the other.

We have decided that the elections should take place on a Wednesday - like local elections in Northern Ireland - so that the counting of votes (which will be a lengthy process in the larger constituencies) can be completed before the weekend.

As hon Members know the elections will take place on the basis of the present 12 parliamentary constituencies and will return an Assembly of 78 members. The Order setting out the election timetable and the rules for the conduct of the election will be made shortly thus providing sufficient time for preparation by the electoral staff and by the parties.

I commend the draft Order to the House.