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PC 268/b  
E.R. 23/19

29/6

PS/Secretary of State (L&B) - M

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1535  
29 JUN 1984  
MUFAX ROOM  
STORMONT HOUSE, DUBLIN

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- cc PS/Ministers (L&B) - M
- PS/PUS (L&B) - M
- PS/Sir Ewart Bell - M
- Mr Brennan
- Mr Bourn - M
- Mr Buxton - M
- Mr Carvill - M
- Mr Angel
- Mr Merifield - M
- Mr Doyne-Ditmas - M
- Mr Reeve - M
- Mr Abbott
- Mr Wood
- Mr Templeton - M
- Mr Clark - FCO
- Mr Needham
- Mr Bickham

FORUM DEBATE: 2 JULY

I attach a revised draft speech for the Secretary of State to draw on in opening the debate on the Forum Report. This takes account of the points which he and other Ministers made at the meeting on 28 June.

The effect has been slightly to lengthen the speech, but I have tried to offset this by shortening some of the less crucial sections. I have tried also to maintain the balance between the nationalist and unionist positions in the speech and have amended little the key section on realities since, as the Secretary of State knows, it is this section which will be seen as our substantive response to the principles in the Forum Report and will be examined particularly carefully by the Irish Government and others when it is printed in Hansard.

I am submitting separately background briefing and supplementary notes for the debate.

*J. M. Lyon*

J M LYON

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29 June 1984

DEBATE ON THE FORUM REPORT AND OTHER DOCUMENTS : 2 JULY

Mr Speaker, I beg to move that this House do now adjourn.

2. I welcome this opportunity to review the position in Northern Ireland and to comment on recent developments. The House will wish to consider the Report of the New Ireland Forum and many other views and positions including those in the documents recently published by the Northern Ireland political parties and in the Assembly debate on the Forum Report itself.

3. I want to make clear at the outset that the Government welcomes any constructive and open-minded proposals intended to improve the position in Northern Ireland. That is the spirit in which we approach the Forum Report and the other documents. The Forum Report itself was published on 2 May. There were parts of it which we found disappointing and for the reasons I shall explain, unacceptable. But I also recognise the positive value of its serious examination of nationalist aspirations; its emphasis on the importance of consent; and its unequivocal condemnation of violence; its attempts to understand something of the unionist identity, and its openness to discuss other views.

4. The Forum was not alone. There have been responses published by the DUP and more recently, a paper by the Alliance Party in Northern Ireland. And a week before the Forum Report, the Ulster Unionist Party published proposals for administrative devolution entitled *The Way Forward*. In its tone, in its attempts to recognise something at least of an Irish dimension, in its recognition of the importance of finding a consensus, in its stated

openness to discussion, it too has helped to create a new and more positive climate in which there may be some hope of progress.

5. The Government are determined not to let this opportunity pass. So, over the next months, we will be offering and encouraging practical and realistic discussions with all those who share with the Government a concern for the present situation in Northern Ireland.

6. The Forum Report goes through in some detail what it calls the origins of the problem since 1920 and gives its assessment of the present position. I want therefore to give briefly the Government's own assessment, because I believe it confirms our view that it is essential that we should now seek to take things forward.

7. The security situation is central to any assessment. We cannot ignore its seriousness. (It's been going on too long). No-one can take calmly the 39 deaths which occurred in the first 6 months this year. The 300 or so injuries. The 100 or so explosions. Now I know that violence and terrorism has declined in recent years. I take no credit for it. I acknowledge the work of the security forces. The Chief Constable and the GOC have my full confidence and support.

8. But there is no getting away from the fact that Northern Ireland, and not just Northern Ireland, remains in mortal danger as long as terrorism continues. I'm sickened by it. Most people in Northern Ireland are sickened by it. We all want to see it ended. Terrorism holds no solutions. Rather the reverse. Every incident makes progress harder. Each one raises tensions and pushes people further apart. Fighting terrorism means fighting those consequences. It

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means people in the community not answering violence with violence. It means the whole community giving the security forces their full support.

9. The security forces have a right to expect that support. They have a duty also to earn it. I want to give everyone confidence in the security forces; in the society which they uphold and which terrorists want to take from us. That requires not more security effort - there's already a lot of that - but greater political will. Terrorism tries to undermine democratic politics - we must find a strong and effective political response. Unless we do so terrorism will go on. It may well get worse.

10. Now, I recognise the fears of some politicians in Northern Ireland that any political development, any sign of <sup>a</sup> political move, will encourage terrorists to increase their efforts. But terrorists need no excuses. They will fight on. To achieve their ends they must show that peaceful politics can't bring peaceful change. So if we try to prove them wrong we must expect them to come back at us. Nevertheless, unless we are prepared to try to move things forward politically, despite the short-term consequences, the long-term future is bleak and bloody. We simply cannot afford to go on as we are.

11. I draw the same conclusion from the economic situation. The Northern Ireland economy is not alone in facing problems. It shares them with the Republic and with much of the rest of the United Kingdom. But we cannot sensibly afford to go on as we are. Northern Ireland depends on a lot of money from the Exchequer - more than £1 billion last year. Understandably, the people of Great

Britain want to be convinced that that expenditure is justified. Northern Ireland suffers also from high unemployment - 21.6% at present over the whole Province, but much higher in some areas.

12. Of course, there are some hopeful signs. Unemployment has levelled out in recent months. And business confidence is growing. Shorts and Harland and Wolff, and private companies like AVX and STC are evidence of that.

13. But let us be realistic about the economic prospects if we go on as we are. We shall find it very difficult to stop unemployment rising in the next few years. With many more young people looking for jobs, things will become more difficult, not less. On a pretty optimistic estimate, unemployment is likely to rise to 25% - a quarter of the whole working population - in the next 4 years. The consequences are clear. We risk creating a climate in which violence and disorder seem the only answers and in which constitutional politics seem ineffective and irrelevant. We must find a better way.

14. Everyone in business I speak to tells me the same thing. Northern Ireland must have greater peace and stability. Otherwise we frighten away investment. The terrorists and their political apologists know that and want it to happen, ignoring the price the people they pretend to represent will have to pay. I don't. I want a better future for everyone in Northern Ireland. But that simply won't happen if things go on as they are.

15. The implications therefore are clear and they affect everyone. Greater political stability and the defeat of terrorism will increase

the chance of getting a job, and will help to provide for a more prosperous community.

16. Now I don't want to suggest that nothing has been achieved in Northern Ireland in recent years. Successive Governments have done much to provide a more acceptable standard of living. Housing - once extremely dilapidated - is <sup>now</sup> vastly improved; and the European Community has helped. Education is still very good. Health and social services have been expanded. There is an impressive range of leisure facilities.

17. We have also tried to give a greater sense of fairness. There is the work of the Ombudsman, the Fair Employment Agency, the Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights and bodies such as the Housing Executive. They have done much to ensure that discrimination and that unfair treatment can be challenged. In 1983 the Northern Ireland Parliamentary Ombudsman received no complaints at all of political or religious discrimination. That is impressive evidence of significant improvement. I do not just seek credit for the present Government for all this. It is a legacy and an achievement of which successive British Governments can be rightly proud - so <sup>too</sup> can a number of leading politicians in Northern Ireland.

18. But despite all this, I recognise the minority in Northern Ireland feel they have lesser opportunities and suffer more discrimination than the majority. They feel it in the services they receive, in the jobs they are offered, in their contacts with the police and the army. Whatever is the reality, we must accept and respond to this perception. And this will require a political response which will give the minority more confidence in the structures of government in Northern Ireland.

19. For all these reasons this Government, like its predecessors, has tried honourably to encourage political understanding within the communities. The Northern Ireland Assembly is a sincere attempt to provide a framework for this. Few would have thought that, now 18 months on, the Assembly would still be with us. Many, politicians and journalists, wrote its epitaph before even it was born. They were wrong. The Assembly has survived and in many respects has succeeded. The Assembly and its departmental committees have worked very hard. And their work has not been wasted. We have very often accepted their recommendations and responded to their suggestions. The Assembly has amply shown the value of having a channel for local views to influence administrative decisions. That is why I have always regretted the SDLP have not felt able to take the opportunity it provides.

20. It was, I believe, John Morley, Mr Gladstone's Ireland Secretary, who said in 1886 that: "The best guarantee of justice in public dealings is the participation in their own government of the people most likely to suffer from injustice." The Assembly provides an opportunity for such participation. I never thought it would make progress fast. It was designed to take things slowly. The Committee which the Assembly has set up to study possible structures for devolution is another natural step which could hold out the prospect of further measured and well-considered progress.

21. This then is the background against which we have to judge the prospect for movement. We do not have a simple choice between doing something and doing nothing. We cannot ignore the situation in Northern Ireland and expect nothing to happen. The security situation will continue to be serious. The difficulties with the

economy will remain. And the political situation may well deteriorate further. What this House has therefore to decide is whether the time is now right to try again to get some understanding between the parties. <sup>I am convinced it is.</sup> We may only be able to make small steps, but they are surely better than none at all. Edward Burke said: "nobody made a greater mistake than he who did nothing because he could only do a little." I don't intend to make that mistake. And in that spirit, I approach the recent documents on Northern Ireland.

shall  
22. I refer in some detail to the Forum Report, but I want to say something first about the Ulster Unionist document "The Way Forward". I welcome, not so much everything it says, but the tone in which it says it. I am glad that Dr FitzGerald has recognised <sup>Irish</sup> the value of this document and that he and the Government are studying it with care. I am sure the SDLP and the other constituent political parties in Northern Ireland will do so as well. I am glad that, despite their strictures on the Assembly, the official unionists have returned to it. Now their paper along with other proposals put forward by the DUP and by the Alliance Party can be examined together by the Committee on devolution.

23. I particularly welcome the recognition which the official unionist paper gives to the position of the minority in Northern Ireland. It refers to the need for, and I quote, "a mutual recognition of each other's hopes and fears". It recognises that a feeling of discrimination does exist in the minority community and suggests that it may be in the interests of the people of Northern Ireland as a whole to have the rights of individuals explicitly set out in legislation. It refers positively to the cultural aspects of the Irish dimension. And it urges that, and I quote again, "every effort

should be made to provide for a devolved administration in Northern Ireland in which majority and minority representatives can participate without prejudice to their position on the constitutional question."

24. Now, it is too early to say whether the specific ideas which "The Way Forward" sketches out - of administrative devolution transferring local authority-type powers to the Assembly, of possible safeguards through entrenched clauses or weighted majorities, or even some sort of Bill of Rights - it is too early to say whether these ideas can be made to work and might be acceptable. I do not myself believe that devolving local authority-type powers to an Assembly, or indeed to district councils, would of itself be sufficient or acceptable to the minority. Many of these powers are highly sensitive and the legacy of mistrust lives on. I do not rule it out completely: I think it should be discussed. But in my view there would need to be other elements and greater involvement to reassure the minority.

But

25. /I want to be as positive as I can about all these ideas, as indeed I will be about others which will no doubt be put forward today. I see "The Way Forward" says that its proposals are "not intended to be in any way definitive" and that its very generality is intended to make it "the less entrenched and the more open to negotiations". I warmly welcome the spirit of that approach.

26. It is a spirit which is present too in the Forum Report. When the Report was published on 2 May, I issued a statement on behalf of the Government saying that we welcomed some important positive elements in the Report but we could not accept other parts

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of it. But do not under-estimate the achievement of the Forum in bringing the Nationalist Parties together. Whatever may have been said afterwards, even immediately afterwards, the Report represents the considered and agreed views of constitutional nationalists in the North and in the South. Given the history, that was a considerable achievement.

27. The Forum has also made very clear throughout its Report its condemnation of violence. As it says, "attempts from any quarter to impose a particular solution through violence must be rejected along with the proponents of such methods". Violence is not therefore an option; and the threat of violence is not on the agenda.

28. Hand in hand with its rejection of violence, the Report acknowledges the central importance of consent. The Report says that political arrangements would have to be "freely negotiated and agreed to by the people of the North and by the people of the South." A solution cannot be imposed: progress can only be made by, and I quote, "agreement and consent."

29. The Report also tries, perhaps less successfully, to recognise and respect the Unionist viewpoint. Given all that is past, that needs to be recognised.

30. The Report also, of course, had parts which we found unpalatable and unrealistic. It is a pity that the Forum Report portrays successive UK Government as being concerned only with security and making no other efforts or initiatives to improve the situation in Northern Ireland. The considerable efforts of my predecessors on both sides of the House over the last 15 years in no way justifies

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such conclusions. They are not helpful in creating a spirit of understanding or a climate of trust between London and Dublin, or indeed between Dublin and Belfast.

31. But a greater weakness than this lies in those parts of the Report which lead it to recommend a unitary state as a first option with a form of federation or in effect joint sovereignty as other options - each to be achieved by, and I quote, "agreement and consent". The conclusion is presumably founded on a belief that the Unionist majority in Northern Ireland will consent to such formulations. The House will need no telling that this is a fallacy, and indeed a dangerous fallacy. [It is a fallacy which seems to be shared in some other parts of the House. I await therefore with interest to hear how those who seek unity be consent imagine they will secure it in the foreseeable future]. Consent cannot be engineered or induced by fear. It is wishful thinking to imagine that Unionists in Northern Ireland will agree to any of the specific options detailed in the Forum Report.

32. But it would be unfair to the tone of the Report and to the way it has been presented by the Irish Government to concentrate on only/these detailed points. The report leaves room for other views. As it says, "the parties to the Forum also remain to discuss other views which may contribute to political development". Indeed, Dr FitzGerald described the Report as an agenda and not a blueprint. And he put particular emphasis on the realities and the principles set out in the first paragraphs of chapter 5 of the Report. Recognising our different perspectives, he suggested we give our own understanding of the realities in Northern Ireland. I agree that would be helpful: and I am glad to do so now.

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33. The Government accepts as a first and fundamental reality that all the political aspirations of the two communities in Northern Ireland cannot be completely and equally satisfied. It is a fact that the majority of people in Northern Ireland are totally committed to maintaining Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom; and are as firmly opposed to Northern Ireland becoming part of a united Ireland on any terms.

34. The Unionist population, mainly Protestant and over 60% of the total population, wish to remain part of the United Kingdom. That was reflected in the 2/3 vote which went to Unionist parties in the last general election and was reflected again in the European elections 2 weeks ago. Unionists utterly reject incorporation into an Irish state with what they see as its Roman Catholic ethos, its tradition of neutrality and political parties from a very different background.

35. At the same time there is substantial and significant minority of people in Northern Ireland strongly committed to Northern Ireland sooner or later becoming part of united Ireland. They feel no sense of identification with many aspects of government nor with those whose job it is to uphold law and order in Northern Ireland. They resent the fact that there is so little scope for expression of their Irish identity. They see themselves as excluded from any effective exercise of political power over the affairs of the province as a whole. This increases the suspicion/which they view the actions and motivations of both unionists in Northern Ireland and the Government of the United Kingdom. As the European election results remind us, they are a sizeable minority in Northern Ireland and cannot, must not, be ignored.

36. These opposing views are strongly rooted in Northern Ireland and have been for many years. Fifteen years of violence have deepened suspicions and mistrust in both communities. Agreement is now harder to achieve. To suggest that there is some simple and quick solution which can somehow overcome these fundamental differences only arouses false expectations and fears and so leads to greater instability and violence. We must be realistic about our objectives and our difficulties.

37. The second reality is that, whatever views may be taken about the merits of partition, now, more than 60 years on, Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom and is recognised internationally as such. Indeed, Northern Ireland has been part of the United Kingdom for more than 150 years and Protestants have been part of Northern Ireland much longer. It is right, therefore, both in principle and in practice that the constitutional position of Northern Ireland should only be amended by the freely given consent of the people of Northern Ireland. That has been recognised by successive Irish Governments. For our part it is the reality set out in Section 1 of the Northern Ireland Constitution Act 1973. It is not just a matter of law. To alter the constitutional position against the passionate wishes of the majority of its inhabitants would be indefensible, undemocratic and frankly unworkable. But the Forum Report was wrong to suggest that section 1 inhibits the dialogue necessary for political progress. Rather, if it were possible for the implications of that reality to be fully accepted, then it should open up the possibilities for dialogue without fear of misunderstanding or misrepresentation.

38. The third reality is that as long as Northern Ireland is a sovereign part of the United Kingdom, its government and administration

must ultimately remain a matter for this Parliament. It is for Parliament to decide. But Parliament has rightly to take account not just of the wishes and strongly held principles of the majority in Northern Ireland, but also the strongly-held views and principles of the minority. It must be satisfied that there is the necessary degree of acceptance for whatever it has to decide since without that no democracy can be made to work. It must recognise too the interests, values and standards of the people of the United Kingdom as a whole. This does not necessarily mean that Northern Ireland will be governed in exactly the same way as other parts of the United Kingdom or that it must be governed exactly as the majority wish. We will take account of all the views: but this Government accepts its duty to advise Parliament on these matters, and at the right time to make our own recommendations to Parliament. When it comes to the Government and administration of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom, there is no Unionist veto, just as there is no Nationalist veto.

39. Fourthly, the Government and administration of Northern Ireland must be undertaken in the light of the needs and the responses of the people there and the resources available to the United Kingdom as a whole. We believe these needs are best met in a devolved administration which has the support of both sides of the community. But in the absence of agreement to such an administration, the Government will continue to administer Northern Ireland in the way it judges best for all the people of the Province and in the interests of the United Kingdom as a whole.

40. We recognise the sense of grievance and frustration which history has created in the minority community in Northern Ireland, and the

consequent suspicion with which they view the actions and motivation of both the Unionists in Northern Ireland and of the government of the United Kingdom. So at the same time as we are committed to the support of the majority in their right to self-determination, we are equally committed to the minority. Arrangements should be directed at recognising the Irish identity, and at developing the minority's participation and confidence in all the structures and processes of Northern Ireland. Perhaps there are aspects of our practices and administration which are not sensitive enough to those requirements. We are ready to discuss with the constitutional representatives of the minority community to identify what these are and see what we can do to help. I am convinced something can come out of this. But while the Government is prepared to recognise and accommodate the sense of Irish identity among the minority in this way, it cannot accommodate any identity, whether Unionist or Nationalist, expressed through violence or through rejection of the law and institutions of Northern Ireland.

41. Finally, and it is the fifth reality, geography, as well as the fact that many people in Northern Ireland look to Dublin, calls for a close relationship between the Government of the United Kingdom and the Republic. We have much in common. Much of our history is shared. We have a cultural heritage which is distinctive but intertwined. Family ties bind many of us together. We share many of the same concerns in society, in our economies, in our relations with other parts of the world, in our Parliamentary traditions and democratic values. We are major trading partners, we are both members of the European Community, we share a common border and we have a joint and abiding concern for the peace, stability and prosperity of these islands. There are the realities of our relationship:

This Government is ready to look for practical and realistic ways of recognising these realities to the fullest extent possible.

42. There has been much talk of Councils and institutional co-operation. Many find attractive an Anglo-Irish Parliamentary Body. I commend the spirit of friendship and co-operation which has governed the activities of this House's Anglo-Irish Parliamentary Group. I hope we can build more on the foundations they have laid. There are indeed ideas in all sorts of areas - security, economic, parliamentary - which are worth exploring for the benefits they will bring to all sides. We have many common interests and common causes. We could usefully develop activities and arrangements jointly in such areas. But, however beneficial such ideas might be, not least for security arrangements, they are unlikely to be accepted, and therefore they are unlikely to be workable, as long as there is the suspicion that they are directed not at reflecting the interests of the minority in Northern Ireland and our common concerns, but at advancing the Republic's constitutional claim against the wishes and consent of the majority of the people in Northern Ireland. The need for assurance and countering alienation is not all one way.

43. The Government believes that these are the realities which will affect the conduct of discussions on the way forward for Northern Ireland in the next few months. Let us be clear about them. The present situation is not satisfactory - not for the Government who face the continued drain on our political, economic and human resources; not for nationalists in Northern Ireland who feel cut off from decision making and from a proper recognition of their Irish identity; not for unionists, blamed for their intransigence and

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as cut off from decision making as the nationalists; not for the Irish Government challenged to propound and justify nationalist aspirations and embarrassed by the terrorist menace; and not for our two countries knowing that Northern Ireland can remain a source of friction and ill-will between us.

44. But if we are to find ways of taking things forward, we must each be convinced that it will lead to real improvement. I am not prepared to introduce measures which are designed simply to enhance the interests of one group or the other and which are guaranteed to lead to further turmoil.

45. We have in the next few months the opportunity to find some better ways, following on from the Forum Report, The Way Forward and the other documents produced by the political parties and the Assembly. I want to see careful, detailed and substantive discussion taking place between each of the parties. I hope each political party in Northern Ireland will be ready to talk to each other, without commitment other than to finding some better way forward. I hope they might do so without great publicity or damaging speculation. We must have some patience and allow for things to be taken quietly and steadily.

46. For our part, the Government will want to have talks with each of the parties involved and with the Irish Government. These may lead in due course to the parties being brought together for discussions if that seems most helpful. In addition, the Prime Minister will meet the Taoiseach before the end of the year. We want that to be a useful and constructive meeting.

47. Throughout all our talks we shall be testing whether, and if so

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in what way, those we meet wish to be involved with the arrangements which might be developed. Unionists can take part in the knowledge that the position of Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom is secure. Nationalists can do so knowing that we want to find an acceptable way to involve them and that we are concerned about the views which the Irish Government have expressed on their behalf.

48. There are many possibilities. I have stated my preference for a devolved administration. It has much to offer both unionists and nationalists. It would complement well the development of normal Anglo Irish relations. Within the various levels of administration in Northern Ireland, it should be possible fully to reflect the width of interest within both communities and to safeguard the concerns of each as well as recognising the British and Irish aspects

49. But such progress can only be made by agreement. If there is no willingness to agree, it will then be for the Government to develop with any of those who are prepared to be involved a form of administration for Northern Ireland which we think is likely to be most effective in practice and which takes adequate account of the needs of those involved, not least on security matters. We shall be guided by the responses we have received in our discussions and by the responsiveness of those to whom we have spoken. Those who wish to be involved may be given a part to play, others not. If/ <sup>therefore</sup> despite all our efforts there is no willingness to agree, then the Government will decide what should be done and will put any proposals it has to Parliament.

50. Such a development would not be welcome to any of us. It would not be in the interests of politically responsible people in

Northern Ireland. It could be uncomfortable for our relations with the Irish Republic. I hope therefore that we can do better than this in finding a way forward. But that is not up to the Government alone. It is <sup>mainly</sup> a matter for the political parties in Northern Ireland, their constituents and their leaders. It will require flexibility and imagination. We have in the past been too preoccupied with the search for the ideal. People have been too ready to hold out for theirs. The way forward may well fall short of everyone's ideal, but accommodation and agreement provides by far the best basis for the future.

51. The coming months are therefore important. We have a real opportunity to take things forward. We must and we will take it. There will no doubt be much rumour, a good deal of apprehension and, I have no doubt, many attempts at misrepresentation. We can expect that terrorists will try to upset the prospects for progress as they have been trying for some time.

52. But in closing I give these assurances. We will not be deflected from seeking political progress by the threat of violence. We shall be guided by the propositions and the realities I have outlined. We shall act in the interests of all the people of Northern Ireland, and of the United Kingdom as a whole; and we will report back to the House on the outcome of our discussions.

53. I commend the Government's approach to the House.

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