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Remarks by Dr. Patrick J. Hillery, Minister for External Affairs at first meeting of Inter-Departmental Unit on the North: 18 June 1970

Criticism is sometimes expressed that no Government here has ever had a continuing Body of any sort concerned with the application of an overall policy designed to find ways and means of bridging the gap between the North and ourselves. I would like to make a comment or two on this subject: firstly all our Governments have had, ever since the division of Ireland, an attitude in relation to the North usually expressed in terms of seeking an end to this division by peaceful means. While we in this part of the country have always been prepared to negotiate the unification of the country on terms which took into account the particular interests of the Northern majority, they, on their side, had turned their backs on us and enforced, in their part of the country, a type of Government and society which rejected as a matter of permanent policy any idea of an Irish nation.

This led them, as much as anything else in their own background and mythology, to look with deep suspicion on a third of the population of the North and to decide, as a guiding principle, that this minority should be treated in such a fashion that their aspirations should be deemed to be disloyal to the State itself and their expression in any shape or form should if possible be made illegal.

The consequences for the minority were discrimination in every way and the denial of any credence or respect for their particular culture and traditions - even though many are shared traditions and the cultural differences are by no means all that incompatible. The consequences for the majority were that they should become, every one of them, supporters of sectarianism and that they should substitute a British identity for their own. Their political leaders overlooked or chose to ignore the fact that being British is a changing thing in a changing world and that the introduction of an immutability to the concept of being British would eventually earn them the ridicule of the British themselves. They also overlooked or chose to ignore the fact that, whatever else may be the faults of the British, within the British community there is a respect for personal decency among people belonging to the community and respect for law applied equally to all citizens - even to those who dissent. Britain's contribution to parliamentary democracy from the Magna Carta onwards is the envy of all civilisations which believe in and try to practise the notion of individual freedom. Unfortunately Magna Carta, in the North, degenerated into the Special Powers Acts and dissent became sedition and, for the minority, almost an obligation.

While the North maintained towards us a posture of refusing to believe that anything good could come out of the South it would have been, in practical terms, a waste of time for us to do much more than we did i.e. to state again and again that the Northern majority is welcome to take its proper place in an Irish nation. While the North denied to its own minority fair and equal treatment it would have been wrong for us to pretend that this was not the case and to treat the North with a respect which it did not deserve.

Conditions have now changed radically. While we have spent the past 50 years in building up and opening up our own society to the point where we can deal, with quiet self-confidence, with our own destiny, the North, much to the regret of any Irishman, has managed to dig its own grave. Whatever will be the outcome of current difficulties and of the British intentions we can be sure of one thing - it is that the days of a separatist regime in the North are numbered. The North can no longer separate itself from modern times; it can no longer separate itself from justice

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and fair play; and ultimately it cannot separate itself from the country as a whole.

I am not suggesting that we shall see an end to Partition within a very short time. I am suggesting that we shall see an end to Partition within, at most, a generation.

Deriving from this I would also suggest that we could see an end to Partition in a much shorter time than that. This is where your work begins. You are asked to do a certain number of tasks. Without going into detail these tasks include - informing yourselves and, through me, the Taoiseach of all the things which could favourably affect North-South relations. These could be economic, social, cultural and so on. They might include studies of the relative standards of living in the two areas so as to see how much they differ in fact rather than in fancy; to see how big, or small, our problem may be in improving our own economic standards to a level acceptable or expected in the North; to look at such things as our social security services to see where they differ from those in the North and how we can improve ours where we fall behind; to distinguish and find areas where our cultural traditions touch each other and intertwine so as to give back to the majority in the North, where it may be lacking, some notion of their own Irishness. Some of these things have been looked at already but will require deeper study and this Unit no doubt will make suggestions for deeper and wider studies.

In this regard there could well be a useful contribution from the Universities. I would like you to bear this in mind.

By this short recital I do not wish to imply any limitation on the things you might think about and recommend - quite the contrary. The whole matter is open. It is my desire that an active, but informed, challenge should be made to any policies or practices which have grown up in our jurisdiction and now militate against or even simply ignore the essential unity of Ireland. This generation should not, through default, continue in erroneous paths through lack of knowledge or interest.

Overall policy in relation to the North remains, of course, the prerogative of the Taoiseach and the Government and naturally does not come within your terms of reference. However, you will be aware of it and of its development through your Chairman (Mr. Ronan) or, in his absence, his alternate (Mr. Gallagher) in so far as it will give you necessary guidance.

Now I leave you to it and will be glad to have from time to time such reports on your activities as you will wish me to convey to the Taoiseach. It is important that you should keep us informed regularly and that what you do and suggest will be a continuous effort.