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Reference Code:	2005/151/719
Title:	Northern Ireland Press Office press release on publication of report of the Northern Ireland Constitutional Convention
Creation Date(s):	10 November 1975
Level of description:	Item
Extent and medium:	2 pages
Creator(s):	Department of the Taoiseach
Access Conditions:	Open
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Stormont Castle, Belfast
10 November, 1975

CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION REPORT

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Mr Merlyn Rees, MP, made the following statement in the House of Commons this afternoon (Monday):-

The Report of the Northern Ireland Constitutional Convention has now been transmitted to me by the Chairman. The report will be published as soon as possible in the new session of Parliament and will be laid in accordance with the requirements of the Northern Ireland Act.

The House will recall that the Convention was set up under the Act of 1974 for the specific purpose of "considering what provision for the government of Northern Ireland is likely to command the most widespread acceptance throughout the community there". This was the sole task of the Convention. It was not a Parliament or an Assembly and, as a Convention, had no advisory or other functions in the governmental field. It was in the discharge of its statutory task that it transmitted its report to me.

Under the provisions of the Act, the Convention is now dissolved, although there is a provision under which it may be recalled at any time within six months of the date on which the report was submitted, which takes us to 7 May. In answer to a Question on 31 October by my hon Friend the Member for Sheffield, Attercliffe, I announced that I had decided to exercise my discretion under the Act to continue to pay salaries to members of the Convention. Suitable allowances will also be paid. I regard it as essential that members of the Convention should continue to be available for further consultations on constitutional matters. I wish to make it clear again that the Convention is not - cannot be - an advisory body to me. No decision has been taken whether or not to recall it for its Constitutional purposes.

The House will not expect me at this time to make any substantive comment on the report. As will be seen when the report is published it deals with a number of fundamental issues affecting the future government of Northern Ireland. These include, for example, the form of that Government, its powers and functions, its legal authority, questions of constitutional rights and its relationship with Parliament, financial assistance and taxation and responsibility for law and order and the use of the Army. Both the Government and this House will wish to consider these matters very carefully, and I also hope that the people of Northern Ireland will ponder upon them since they profoundly affect the future of Northern Ireland. It is important that Parliament should now have time to consider the Convention's report so that when, at an appropriate moment, we come to debate these matters, we shall do so on the basis of considered views. Nevertheless, I should make it clear that the British Army is under the control of this Parliament only, and the sovereignty of The Queen in the Parliament of the United Kingdom rests also at Westminster.

There is no quick and easy solution to the problems of Northern Ireland, and my strong view is that everything we say and do should acknowledge this. Meanwhile, Northern Ireland will continue to be governed by, and from, this Parliament. It is in accordance with this principle that the Northern Ireland Act 1974 provides for all functions of government to be exercised by me, with the help of other Ministerial colleagues. That is the position until Parliament decides otherwise.

I should finally wish to take the opportunity - and I am sure that the whole House will join with me in this - of paying a warm tribute to the Chairman of the Convention, Sir Robert Lowry, and his staff, for the way in which he has guided the work of the Convention.