



Northern Ireland Office

Press Notice

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Stormont Castle, Belfast

14 November 1972

TEXT OF STATEMENT DELIVERED IN HOUSE OF COMMONS, WESTMINSTER,
BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND, MR WILLIAM
WHITELAW MP, DURING THE DEBATE ON THE DISCUSSION PAPER -
"THE FUTURE OF NORTHERN IRELAND"

I very much welcome this debate on my Paper for Discussion on the Future of Northern Ireland which was published on 30 October. The purpose of that paper was quite simply to provide a basis on which we in this country and the people in Northern Ireland could discuss how to take further and speedy steps forward in shaping the future of Northern Ireland. A good deal has been said in recent months on this matter, not all of it realistic. What Northern Ireland now wants is informed and responsible discussion. It seems to me to be very right that this House should today play a leading part in this discussion because the United Kingdom Government, answerable to this Parliament, has the full responsibility for any future constitutional arrangement. The paper seeks to set out the facts about events in Northern Ireland with complete impartiality. I have been pleased to read in the Press that it is widely recognised to have done so. This is very important because any successful solution for the future of Northern Ireland must be based on the facts as they are rather than as one section of opinion or another would like them to be. Perhaps inevitably in an emotional situation so much of the argument put to me is based on allegations and imaginary fears and prejudices. And so I ask this House at the start of this debate to consider the situation quite simply as the Paper for Discussion does on the basis of actual facts. Only if we do that can we hope for an informed and rational discussion of any proposals for the future in Northern Ireland itself.

I believe it is widely recognised that any solution to the problems of Northern Ireland must be based on a combined political and military approach. There can be no purely military solution at the same time. Any political initiatives will be still-born if we fail to deal with violence.

It is important to stress these facts because I would not like it to be thought that when today we are discussing the political aspects Her Majesty's Government or this House were in any way neglecting our security responsibilities or minimising the tragic loss of life, the damage to property and the suffering endured by the people of Northern Ireland in these last years. Nor does it mean we are overlooking the steadfastness and achievements of the security forces, both Army and RUC, under desperately difficult conditions. Nevertheless, I am sure that the House will agree that in this debate we must try to see beyond the immediate situation since if we are too immersed in the day-to-day incidents, many of them nicely calculated to impose political pressure, we may fail to direct our attention to the long-term reforms which must very soon be made in Northern Ireland. The Paper for Discussion tries to take the debate off the streets and to set it in a much wider context.

I do not intend to repeat what is said in the Paper for Discussion. It speaks effectively for itself. What I hope it does is to discourage wild and irresponsible debate. There has been too much of this. I understand that there are those who have grievances and those who feel a very real sense of frustration. But whatever the sense of grievance or frustration, violence can achieve nothing. Northern Ireland has suffered greatly: the United Kingdom has suffered too as all those who have lost their sons serving as members of the forces know only too well. We must be responsible in discussing the future of the province. There are those who say that the answer is quite simply to pull out troops and let the Northern Irish get on with it.

This would be an abdication of responsibility. The situation in Northern Ireland is very complex and it would be a counsel of despair to say we should wash our hands of it. The people of Northern Ireland are our people and we must help them to find solution.

Some would argue that such a solution lies with complete independence. The Paper for Discussion comments on this. The advocates of this course ignore the fact that Northern Ireland is part of a much wider world and those who favour independence must show how the province, standing entirely on its own, without financial or military help on large scale from the United Kingdom, would become a viable state both economically and socially and would be accepted as such by the world at large. What the Paper for Discussion tries to do is to persuade everyone to face the real facts of the situation.

There is also what might be described as the simple and logical view. This says that if the majority of people in Northern Ireland decide that they wish to remain part of the United Kingdom then they should be treated in every way exactly the same as

the rest of the United Kingdom. Do they give any credibility to their own programmes, so far as these are discernible, by trying to destroy law and order? These men have only shown that they are not capable of taking part in the debate which is now taking place.

The Paper for Discussion attempts to put a reasonable limit on the options open to us all in Northern Ireland, setting a framework within which the debate should now take place. It shows that one cannot ignore the financial support which Northern Ireland receives from the United Kingdom: it shows that for the time being at least the maintenance of law and order depends upon the untiring and unselfish contributions of the armed forces: and that the United Kingdom Government must have an effective and continuing say in Northern Irish affairs to match its financial and military contributions. These are the facts of life. It is also a fact of life that Northern Ireland must be seen in a wider context - as part of Ireland and as a part of Europe.

It is no good on the one hand denying this or on the other building too much on it. As there has been considerable discussion about those paragraphs in the paper headed "The Irish Dimension", I will at this point re-emphasise the position of Her Majesty's Government. In accordance with the specific pledges given by successive United Kingdom Governments Northern Ireland must and will remain part of the United Kingdom for so long as that is the wish of a majority of the people. Equally it is undoubted that the sole and ultimate responsibility for any constitutional proposals must rest with the United Kingdom Government and Parliament. At the same time, it would clearly be desirable that any new arrangements for Northern Ireland and Great Britain, be so far as possible, I emphasise so far as possible, acceptable to and accepted by the Republic of Ireland. Furthermore, in the context of the European Economic Community there is a clear opportunity for developing co-operation on economic and social issues which could bring considerable benefits to the people in the north and south of Ireland. Indeed, before Direct Rule the Ulster Unionist Government were themselves anxious to promote such contacts. Nor can anyone deny that co-operation on border security would be of inestimable benefit to all concerned. It is with these thoughts in mind that I welcome Mr Lynch's approach to this paper as outlined in his recent speech.

It is too soon for HMG to express any final view on what constitutional settlement would be suitable for Northern Ireland. We should first like to hear the views of this House and those of the people of Northern Ireland. I should, however, like to say this. Whatever the constitutional settlement may be, it will undoubtedly provide meaningful responsibility in Northern Ireland. The Macrory reforms have already laid down a number of functions which will have to be performed centrally in Northern Ireland: and there are in addition likely to be other important tasks which will undoubtedly fall to be done centrally.

These are likely to be very worthwhile - going beyond what any region in the United Kingdom at present does - and it is no service to Northern Ireland to attempt to run down whatever eventual solution might be decided upon. The solution will have much to offer both the majority and the minority communities in Northern Ireland. The minority will know that they will henceforward have a real community of interest and that they will be able to participate in the running of their own country. Equally, if such an opportunity is to be given to the minority they and, in particular, those who seek to lead them, must be prepared to accept responsibility in the full sense of the word. The majority have much to gain too. There may be those who will say that they can only be the losers in the present situation. This is not so. What the majority community will know is that henceforward Northern Ireland will have a constitution which all people in the country will, we hope, be prepared to operate. This is a very real gain for them. The Paper for Discussion is, therefore, the basis on which we can all discuss the future of Northern Ireland and reach firm decisions as soon as possible. There will now be further consultations and these will be conducted with the utmost urgency. It will be our objective - through the Plebiscite and the publication of firm proposals for the governing of Northern Ireland - to end as soon as possible the current uncertainty upon which so many fears have been feeding. There are some people who have opted out of any constructive debate. But the others, the great majority, now look for leadership. This must come from the political parties in Northern Ireland. Posterity will not readily forgive them if at this time they do not show themselves able to take a broad view. At the same time, we need a major effort to bring to an end the cycle of violence and counter violence, or force and counter force. I, for my part, will do everything I can towards this end. Those who use or threaten violence cannot be allowed to ignore the demands of a whole community for peace if that demand is sustained. Everyone must know violence can achieve nothing. The Provisional IRA must know that the effect of their campaign is only to create new and deeper divisions in the community than ever existed before: and militant Protestant organisations must realise that threats by them merely build up support for the IRA and make the ending of conflict more remote. There must now be an overwhelming demand from both communities that violence and threats of violence must stop. We must move on with our debate on the future of Northern Ireland so that early in the New Year Her Majesty's Government can make known their views on the future of Northern Ireland, building upon the result of our consultation with the parties in Northern Ireland.

It is for this Parliament to enact the necessary legislation: but, if it is to have any chance of success, it must give effect to what the people of Northern Ireland want, while making no unreasonable demands on the United Kingdom.

It is for the people in Northern Ireland who must operate the new constitution, whatever it is, and it is for them to make known what they want. They will be much helped in this if this House remains united in its views. Northern Ireland is not, and should not be, a matter of Party division. If it does become so, there are those in Northern Ireland who will not be slow to exploit it. I can assure the House, therefore, that it will be in this spirit that Her Majesty's Government will conduct any discussion with the parties here at Westminster.

Furthermore, I know that the Rt Hon Gentlemen opposite and their Hon friends share this same objective with us, while we all recognise that in the final event Her Majesty's Government must take the full responsibility for any proposals. The way ahead is beset by many difficulties and dangers. There can be few problems where criticism is so easy and responsibility more difficult, where destructive thought is so simple, and constructive action so hard to provide.

I believe that the Paper for Discussion will help us to go ahead towards a genuine settlement for Northern Ireland which, if backed by all moderate opinion, offers a real opportunity for all the people of Northern Ireland.