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24th June, 1971

## Speech by Mr. Austin Currie M.P. during the Debate on the Queen's Address

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Mr. Currie: It was my intention to deal with only one aspect of the Queen's Speech but in view of the speech by the Minister of Commerce I think I ought to make some slight reference to it. After all it is not every year that Father Christmas arrives in the month of June. To an extent the Minister of Commerce has been doing the Father Christmas bit today. I might say that this year Father Christmas has a blue suit instead of a red one. I think the Minister will appreciate it if I say to him that his speech today at the Dispatch Box was particularly dazzling.

I must say that I certainly welcome his announcement of the intention to build an advance factory in Dungannon and I presume it will be in the Dungannon area. I hope the Minister has borne in mind the point I have made to him on a number of occasions of 24 per cent. male unemployment in areas surrounding Dungannon particularly in that area which is in my constituency. I just say that I am not satisfied. No hon. Member will be satisfied until such time as jobs are available for everyone who needs them but certainly his announcement today is one slight step in the right direction.

In my experience in this House since 1964 through a number of Queen's Speeches I think this probably has been the best debate of its kind. There have been a number of speeches which could be described as good. The Prime Minister is well aware that it is not very often I compliment him in public, or in private for that matter, but I intend to do so on this occasion. I think it was his contribution to this debate which encouraged other hon. Members to contribute good speeches. He raised the tone of the debate and the result was that a number of other hon. Members attempted to do the same thing. So far, and I hope my contribution is not an exception, this has been a constructive debate and it has been a well worth-while debate.

The Prime Minister used a word in his speech which is one about which we have heard a lot recently. That word is "participation". It is not so long ago since the political party to which I belong became the first party to use that word and to underline it. I have noticed that since that time this word "participation" has appeared in statements which have been made at Westminster, in Belfast and in some which have been issued from Dublin. It is not by accident that that word has been used and has been emphasised so much.

In his speech the Prime Minister said that it was his intention to promote genuine and constructive participation in the work of Parliament by all hon. Members. He used a phrase which I doubt I could have bettered myself. That statement mirrors the feelings which I have and which my hon. Friends have on this subject. I am glad that the Prime Minister and the Government accept the necessity for participation; that they accept the need to have greater participation by hon. Members than there has been in the past. I am glad that he has accepted that both the Government and the Opposition have a responsibility to bring about this state of affairs.

It must be recognised, and I think it must be stated at this juncture, that apart from the necessity of achieving greater participation these changes were necessary anyway as a result of the Macrory Report and the implementation of its recommendations. It should be recognised that on that level this is not a new initiative. It should not be stated to be such and it should not be seen to be such because on that level these changes were necessary anyway.



I think all hon. Members are now beginning to appreciate the tremendous additional work load which will be imposed upon them as a result of the implementation of the Macrory Report.

I am thinking of the additional responsibilities which will be given to hon. Members particularly in the fields of housing, welfare and education. I am sure that it will be accepted that this burden will be greater for some hon. Members than for others. This is so because there are certain constituencies in certain areas where there is a tradition of hard constituency work. There are some areas where there is a tradition of full-time representation. There are other areas where traditionally there has not been such a burden of work on the local Member.

There are other areas where it is accepted apparently without any misgivings that their public representative should serve them in a part-time capacity. However, the work load of all hon. Members must increase considerably and, therefore, in my opinion, it is necessary to give to hon. Members the additional facilities that are necessary in order that they should be able to cope with the additional work. There must be changes made in the procedure, in the organisation and in the institutions of this House in order to ensure that Parliament and Members of Parliament will be able to cope with the additional work load.

Let me state my personal position on this matter. I feel that when Macrory is implemented, when the central Housing Executive is in operation, when welfare and education become the responsibility of hon. Members that I for one would require a full-time office in my constituency in order to deal with these matters. I think other hon. Members could be put in the same position. Therefore, I feel that it is in the interests of all hon. Members that their role, the role of the House and the role of the machinery of this Chamber ought to be re-examined in the context of the Macrory Report.

I consider the proposed committees, those which the Prime Minister mentioned in his speech, to be useful in enabling hon. Members to deal with new responsibilities and with the increased work which will be placed upon their shoulders. They will be useful on that level alone, even leaving aside for the moment this question of participation. It ought to be put on the record of this House that when we on the Opposition side made our proposals to Macrory we did suggest strongly to him and recommend the type of committees which the Prime Minister now proposes to establish.

We also suggested that the hearings of these committees should be in public; that the Press ought to be present. We even suggested that if there was anything controversial enough that radio and television should be present as well. We did that for one specific reason. It was not because we like to see ourselves on television. Interruption Undoubtedly some of us do like to see ourselves on television and this is not confined to one side of the House. Even some of us like to see others on television on occasions.

The Prime Minister (Mr. Faulkner):

The hon. Member is all right. He can sing, I cannot.

Mr. Currie:

I can sing? If anyone ever describes me as being a good singer there must be something wrong with his musical knowledge. Singing is a bad word in my part of the country.



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I was referring to the question of these committees. We suggested that there should be these committees and that the meetings of the committees should be in public. It was done for a good reason. In this connection I refer to the central Housing Executive. Those of us who have experience of the Housing Trust fear that the Housing Executive could become a bureaucratic body. We know from experience what it is like to go to the Housing Trust to make inquiries, or to make representations on behalf of constituents. We often find that we run into stone-walling. We get the strong impression of bureaucracy at work.

We think that it should be seen publicly that the Housing Executive is a responsible body; that it is amenable to public opinion. In our opinion there is no better way of ensuring this than that the meetings of these committees should be in public; that hon. Members should have the opportunity to cross-examine in public the official of the central Housing Executive and all of the other statutory boards established by the Government. It is only in this way that these boards will be seen publicly to be doing their jobs with the minimum of red tape and the minimum of bureaucracy.

#### AMENDMENT PROPOSED

I have pleasure in moving the Amendment which we have on the Order Paper. It represents our attitude to the Prime Minister's proposals at this stage. I beg to move, that at the end of the Motion to add:

"and while welcoming the expressed intention of the Prime Minister to ensure in the future genuine and constructive participation in the work of Parliament by all its Members and to initiate consultations with members of Opposition parties, humbly regrets that the Government proposals represent only a tinkering with a system which is not relevant to the exceptional conditions of political life in Northern Ireland and calls for the setting up of a Select Committee representative of the House, which would have available to it the necessary expertise and secretariat, for the purpose of recommending the necessary institutional and procedural changes".

In other words, we welcome the proposals which the Prime Minister has made insofar as those proposals go. We regret, however, that they do not go far enough and we have suggested a way in which Government and Opposition can get together in order to discuss these proposals, in order to thrash them out and in order that they be implemented as quickly as possible. We are prepared to give to the Prime Minister's proposals a guarded welcome, but we have not yet had an opportunity to study them in detail. Bearing in mind - and let us be realistic about it - what might be described as the confidence gap between the Prime Minister and ourselves on the Opposition side of the House, then I think that the Prime Minister could not reasonably expect more from us at this stage in time. We are giving the proposals a guarded welcome. We are saying we are prepared to look at them. We are prepared to co-operate but we regret that these proposals in our opinion do not go far enough.

In this Amendment we are saying to the Prime Minister - and I use a colloquialism which I think he will recognise - put your money where your mouth is. This is the reason that we have suggested this Select Committee. The Prime Minister has asked us to participate through these committees and we are saying to him that we are prepared to participate.



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We are prepared to do that now and we suggest in this Motion and we suggest to the Government that we be given an opportunity of participating through this Select Committee in deciding on the powers, the responsibilities and the functions of the committees which the Prime Minister has suggested.

We say to the Prime Minister that we want a say in deciding on their functions, responsibilities and powers. We think that we should have that say and that the best way for us to participate is by bringing about these new institutions in this Select Committee. To an extent the Select Committee which we have suggested could be a pilot scheme. It could be an experiment in the type of participation which the Prime Minister has suggested. We would ask the Government to look at it in that light.

If it is possible for hon. Members to co-operate together on such a Select Committee then obviously it will be possible for hon. Members to co-operate on the other committees which the Prime Minister has suggested. By getting together and discussing these matters in a Select Committee such as we have suggested we will learn some of the difficulties and at the same time gain experience which ought to be extremely useful in establishing these functional committees.

Also in his speech the Prime Minister said:

"I see it as our duty to give a real lead; to be ready to propose quite exceptional measures to break out of the mould of fear and mutual suspicion" - *Official Report*, 22nd June, 1971; Vol. 82, c. 21/

That is a sentiment with which we would agree. It is necessary to have quite exceptional measures if we are to break out of that mould of fear and mutual suspicion. It is for this reason that we say to the Prime Minister that this Select Committee is an opportunity to consider some of the exceptional measures which might be necessary.

The kind of committee we have in mind would be one which would have and must have the best possible advice available to it. It would be a committee which would have the advice of experts in many fields available to it, particularly in the field of constitutional law. It would be a committee which, in our opinion, should look not only at the institutions and the committees which are in existence at Westminster but at institutions which have evolved in other areas. I refer not only to parts of the British Commonwealth but also to countries in Europe, as, for example, Switzerland which in some respects anyway has had similar problems to our own.

What we are saying is this: institutions ought to be made to do the job and we think that there are institutions in existence in other countries which we could take as examples and which could be used to improve the situation here. We are told that the great advantage of any devolved parliament is that it can cater for particular local problems and local needs. We have a devolved Parliament which has not catered for peculiar local conditions and needs. The reason for that was because our devolved Parliament is a replica or model of Westminster which has been transplanted over here.

The House of Commons at Westminster has proved to be suitable in British conditions. It has done the necessary job in the conditions of Britain over the years. But a Westminster-type Parliament is not suitable for the peculiar conditions



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of Northern Ireland. To give one example, the Westminster Parliament depends on a Government and an alternative Government. We have never had an alternative Government because of the artificial situation which we have in this area. Therefore we must stop thinking in terms of what works in Westminster ought to work here because that is not the case. We ought to be thinking in terms of different institutions which will help us to cope with the problems that we have here.

There is one other point which I think must be emphasised at this stage and it is this, that in Northern Ireland over the past two or three years there have been considerable changes; changes which we on this side of the House welcomed 100 per cent; changes which a number of hon. Members on the Government side of the House have regretted and against which they have stubbornly fought. Change in Northern Ireland must be institutionalised. It must be done in such a way as to ensure that in the future that change cannot be gone back on. We must not only think in terms of this Parliament, this Prime Minister, this Government but of the next Parliament or the next Prime Minister or the next Government; or the Prime Minister and the Parliament in 10, 20, 30, 40, or 50 years' time. That is why we believe that the changes which have taken place must be formally recognised and these changes must be institutionalised in such a way as there can be no retraction. This is another reason we advocate the setting up of the Select Committee which could go into this problem and other problems as well.

As hon. Members are aware, the Crowther Commission is examining, among other things, proposals for regional Parliaments in Wales and Scotland. I am led to believe that one of the problems which it has to face is the possibility that Parliamentary-type institutions in Scotland and Wales would have the great disadvantage which our Parliament has, that is, one-party rule. It is feared that local Parliaments in Scotland and Wales would be Labour-dominated. I am told that Crowther would like to have recommendations as how this problem could be overcome. We could give Crowther a lead in this matter. By changing our institutions we could show Crowther how this problem could be overcome. This is a matter which might be considered by the Select Committee which we have suggested.

I regret that the Prime Minister did not make any reference to Proportional Representation. I hope that when he is replying to this debate he will give us a firm statement of Government policy on this matter. He knows our attitude to P.R. He is aware that it is one of the things we have consistently advocated. We have never suggested that Proportional Representation will solve all our problems. What we have suggested is that, taken in conjunction with other changes which we have advocated, P.R. could change the whole political life of this House. As I say, I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will be prepared to say something about Proportional Representation when he replies to the debate.

I should like to say a few words about the role of civil servants in participation and about the relationship between hon. Members and civil servants. One could hardly fault civil servants for sometimes giving the impression that they are Government civil servants. In the political situation which we have had with one party in power for 50 years and with civil servants being used to dealing with Unionist Governments I suppose there is a natural tendency on their part to think like Government civil servants. I am told



that this is not the position at Westminster, that civil servants at Westminster are civil servants, full stop, and there is no detectable bias towards either the Labour Party or the Conservative Party. I should like to think that any hon. Member of this House, no matter to what political party he belongs, would be treated exactly as any other hon. Member when he goes along to see civil servants.

I am not talking purely in terms of constituency cases. In my experience private secretaries do a very good job in looking after the interests of hon. Members. But it is not possible for a person like myself to go along to a high civil servant and inquire as to the thinking in his Department on certain aspects of policy. It ought to be possible for us to meet people in the Departments with a responsibility for formulating policy, talk to them about policy matters and discuss their attitudes and our attitudes to policy development. I hope that in the future civil servants will think a bit more about participation and that consideration will be given to ways in which civil servants and hon. Members could discuss policy matters.

In conclusion, let me say that we are prepared to play our part in this House as of right. We do not think in terms of being asked by the Unionist Party or invited by the Government to play our part. We do not need to be asked to play our part. We do not need to be invited to play our part. We are prepared to do so as Members of this House. We recognise what the Prime Minister asked us to recognise, namely, that participation involves accepting burdens as well as enjoying advantages. We are quite prepared to accept these burdens. In a way it is unfortunate that the Prime Minister's speech had to wait until 22nd June. It would have been much better if it had been made a month or even two months ago. The month of June, coming as it does just before July, is not usually a good time for serious consideration of issues such as those in the Prime Minister's speech. I hope that other events will not overtake us.

It is recognised that the Prime Minister and the Government will face a considerable challenge during this summer. Their political lives depend more on what happens or what could happen on the streets this summer than on the speeches they make in Parliament, no matter how good those speeches are. I hope that these proposals will not be pigeon-holed and then, if the Prime Minister is still in office and this House is still in existence at the end of the summer they will be taken out again and seriously considered. The proposals should be given serious consideration now. A start should be made as quickly as possible in order that some of them can be implemented. It is for that reason also that we are in favour of the setting up of a Select Committee. Such a Committee could be set up and work could start almost immediately. This is an additional reason for supporting our Amendment.

Note:

When winding up his reply to the debate (for text, see Item 7) Mr. Faulkner asked the movers of the Amendment introduced by Mr. Curry not to press it to a Division. The Amendment was put and negotiated, but not, apparently, by formal Division.