

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

IRELAND



Reference Code: 2009/135/722

Creation Date(s): 26 October 1979

Extent and medium: 4 pages

Creator(s): Department of the Taoiseach

Access Conditions: Open

Copyright: National Archives, Ireland. May only be reproduced with the written permission of the Director of the National Archives.

PA 519284



Northern Ireland Information Service

Stormont Castle,
Belfast BT4 3ST
Telephone Belfast 63011
Telex 74163: 74250: 74272

Great George Street,
London SW1P 3AJ
Telephone 01-233-4626
Telex 1918889

Ulster Office,
11 Berkeley Street, London W1
Telephone 01-493-0601
Telex 21839

26 October 1979

SPEECH BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE, RT HON HUMPHREY ATKINS MP, AT A LUNCHEON OF THE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICAN CORRESPONDENTS IN LONDON

First of all let me dispel a few widespread myths about Northern Ireland. It is emphatically not a "colonial situation"; it is not "Britain's Vietnam". For a start it is geographically and politically part of the national territory of the United Kingdom - constitutionally just as much so as England, Scotland or Wales. It is not some far-flung outpost of imperialism struggling to free itself from the suppressive yolk of an ancient conqueror.

By air from London it takes about the same time as the shuttle from Washington to New York. And it is to London that the vast majority of the people of Northern Ireland freely look for the foundations of their way of life.

Their political preoccupation expressed in election after election - is with preserving the union with Great Britain and their attachment to the supreme authority of the British Government and Parliament.

What I am saying in short is simply this: the idea put about in the United States and elsewhere by people emotionally committed to a United Ireland that Britain is in Northern Ireland against the wishes of the people there is demonstrably false. Anyone advancing such views is either totally ignorant of the facts or deliberately irresponsible and mischievous.

Which brings me naturally to the associated issue of "Get the British Army out of Northern Ireland". In the light of what I have just said you might just as well call for the withdrawal of British troops from England, Scotland or Wales - because you are really posing the absurd proposition of removing units of the nation's armed forces from a part of the national territory. It is like arguing that the armed forces of the United States have no right to be in California or Connecticut.

As those of you who have studied the problem will know - and those of you who haven't certainly ought to know - we are dealing with a well orchestrated propaganda campaign which goes hand in hand with the vile and inhuman terrorist campaign of the Provisional IRA. As long as Northern Ireland wishes to remain a part of the United Kingdom - and Parliament has provided for a periodic referendum to test that desire - the Army will be there as it should be for national defence purposes. It was there in garrison strength in permanent barracks before the present situation arose. And it is only there in considerably greater numbers on an active basis now because of the terrorist campaign.

Those who cynically clamour for an end to its active role in aid of the police in Northern Ireland know perfectly well that nothing would please both Her Majesty's Government and the people of Northern Ireland more. And these same people - whether they be in Northern Ireland itself, in the Republic of Ireland, in Great Britain or in the United States of America - also know perfectly well that the reversion of the Army's role in the Province to its normal garrison activity can very simply and swiftly be achieved. All it needs is for the fruitless terrorist campaign which some of these people misguidedly support or murderously participate in to come to an end. The ball is firmly in the IRA's court - not ours.

But until such times as these men without morals or mandate halt their campaign of carnage and destruction the army will continue to fulfil its difficult and dangerous task of aiding the small and hard-pressed police force of the Royal Ulster Constabulary to protect the citizens of Northern Ireland from the worst excesses of the terrorists. And whatever the impression you may get from some of the headlines, they have been doing this with conspicuous success.

I venture to suggest that were a similar sustained terrorist threat to be launched in, say, Texas or Alaska aimed at forcing the State against its democratic will to become part of a neighbouring country Washington would hardly leave it to the local civil power to cope on its own.

In saying all this I am not denying the democratic right of people in Northern Ireland or the Republic of Ireland to aspire to the peaceful unification of the whole island of Ireland by consent. Nor do I deny their right to work publicly and politically towards that end. It is an aspiration shared by the main political parties in the Republic of Ireland and by the Social Democratic and Labour Party in Northern Ireland, which represents some 20 per cent of the voters.

But all of them recognise it as a long-term goal which, if it is to be achieved at all, must be by the freely expressed democratic wish of a majority of the people in Northern Ireland. None of the elected political leaders North or South supports or condones the

achievement of a united Ireland by force of arms. They realise that "unity" obtained at the expense of the maimed and the murdered would not be worth having even if it were possible - which it is certainly not. And I need hardly remind this informed audience that only a few weeks ago on his historic visits to Ireland and the United States the Pope added his clear condemnation of terrorist violence to the many other influential voices which have been raised against it, including the President of the United States and other leading political figures there like Senator Kennedy, Speaker O'Neill and Governor Carey.

The urgent need in Northern Ireland is for provincial political institutions to be re-established so that the Government and Parliament in London can restore to the people of Ulster more control over their own domestic affairs. But the formula must be broadly acceptable to both sections of the community in Northern Ireland and it must involve a form of government which both sections can identify with and spontaneously support. That is the task which I have been actively engaged in with the leaders of the main political parties in Northern Ireland since taking office in May. It is one that following my statement in the House of Commons yesterday is about to enter a new acceleration phase.

Briefly the Government plans to have a conference of the four main political parties in Northern Ireland, under my chairmanship - parties which between them account for four out of five voters in the Province. The intention is that it should meet before the end of November, but before it does so the Government will publish a Consultative Document as a basis for its deliberations.

This document will contain - by way of illustration - a number of different "models" of possible systems of Government, any one of which might in the Government's view suit the special circumstances of Northern Ireland. All will be capable of adaption and our hope is that they will be adapted at the conference in such a way that they can be accepted by representatives of both sides of the community as fair and just.

But I would delude myself and mislead you if I were to pretend the way ahead will be easy. It will require a superhuman effort on the part of all the participants and enormous goodwill and forbearance on the part of those outside Northern Ireland who will be anxious observers of our progress - notably in Great Britain, the Irish Republic and the United States. It will greatly help this process if there is more understanding at all levels in those countries of the true situation in Northern Ireland and the totally legitimate and responsible role of Her Majesty's Government and armed forces in the Province.

I hope that as a result of speaking to this audience today more of that awareness will be forthcoming in the United States and that this will in turn temper the attitudes and utterances and activities of some people and groups there who in their profound ignorance of the situation only play into the hands of an outcast terrorist organisation whose stated aim is to destroy the democratic structure of government in Ireland, North and South and replace it with a distinctly Marxist orientated regime.