



PRESS RELEASE

THE PRIME MINISTER (CAPTAIN THE RT. HON. T. O'NEILL, M.P.) ISSUED
THE FOLLOWING STATEMENT ON SUNDAY AFTERNOON:

I want the people of Ulster to understand in plain terms the events which have taken place since 1st January. The march to Londonderry planned by the so-called Peoples Democracy was from the outset a foolhardy and irresponsible undertaking. At best those who planned it were careless of the effects which it would have; at worst they embraced with enthusiasm the prospect of adverse publicity causing further damage to the interests of Northern Ireland as a whole. I commend all those who, like the Leader of the Nationalist Party, urged that this foolish proposal should be abandoned. I must take quite a different view of those others who, for whatever reasons, endorsed and encouraged it.

Wiser counsels did not prevail and the organisers decided to proceed. I know that many decent people seeing the ill-feeling which has since arisen have asked the question - why was the march allowed to go on? The simple answer is that this is a free country in which people have a right - which ought as far as possible to be protected - to state views however foolish and ill-judged and untimely they may be, provided they keep within the law.

It is true that the Minister of Home Affairs retains a power to ban processions or meetings; and I may say here that Captain Long has, of course, had my full support throughout this difficult week. But the Minister's power to ban is one to be used only when the Police consider their own powers inadequate. Provided the marchers acted within the law and provided others respected, as law-abiding citizens should do, the right of peaceful demonstration there was no reason for physical violence of any sort on the route of the march to Londonderry.

But in the event two things have happened. Some of the marchers and those who supported them in Londonderry itself have shown themselves to be mere hooligans ready to attack the Police and others. And at various places people have attempted to take the law into their own hands in efforts to impede the march. These efforts include disgraceful violence, offered indiscriminately both to the marchers and to the Police, who were attempting to protect them. Of course those who were responsible for this violence were

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playing into the hands of those who are encouraging the current agitation. Had this march been treated with silent contempt and allowed to proceed peaceably, the entire affair would have made little mark and no further damage of any sort would have been done to the good name of Ulster. Indeed in turning their backs in peaceful disapproval of these irresponsible and misguided people those who disapprove of them would have shown a maturity which could only have won new respect. The extremism of the Republicans, radical Socialists and Anarchists can only be defeated by the forces of moderation and not by the forces of some other form of extremism. It deserves to be remembered that it was the refusal of decent people, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, to be provoked which made the last I.R.A. campaign such a failure. Peaceful contempt will bring marches to an end where violence only tends to recruit further marchers.

It is self-evident that the entire situation has gravely stretched the resources of the Police. It must be realised that in the whole of Ulster the regular police force amounts to only 3,000 men - that is one policeman to each 500 of the population. At times one in six of the entire force of the Royal Ulster Constabulary was engaged in protecting the march to Londonderry. The maintenance of law and order in a democracy depends quite as much upon support for the law and respect for the law by the population at large as it does upon the actions of the Police. They have handled this most difficult situation as fairly and as firmly as they could. Their advice throughout has been that the imposition of a ban in the particular circumstances of this march would be likely to hinder rather than help them in their task. They are the professionals in this matter and it would be a grave step to set their advice lightly aside.

But clearly Ulster has now had enough. We are all sick of marchers and counter marchers. Unless these warring minorities rapidly return to their senses we will have to consider a further reinforcement of the regular Police by greater use of the Special Constabulary for normal police duties. It is also high time that certain students returned to the studies for which they have the support of the taxpayer and learned a little more about the nature of our society before displaying again such arrogance towards those who have built up the facilities they enjoy. I think we must also have an urgent look at the Public Order Act itself to see whether we ought to ask Parliament for further powers to control those elements which are seeking to hold the entire community to ransom.

Enough is enough. We have heard sufficient for now about civil rights:

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let us hear a little about civið responsibility. For it is a short step from the throwing of paving stones to the laying of tombstones and I for one can think of no cause in Ulster today which will be advanced by the death of a single Ulsterman.