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PRESS RELEASE

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, MAJOR THE RT HON J D CHICHESTER-CLARK DL MP, ON
THE DEBATE ON THE McCORRY REPORT IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS ON THURSDAY
29 OCTOBER 1970

This has been a full debate, a frank debate, a useful debate. My rt hon Friends and I have come here not with our minds made up about the detailed future pattern of local government, but with certain principles clearly fixed in our minds. Of these principles I shall speak in a moment. Hon Members will forgive me, I am sure, if I do not take up and reply to every detailed point they have made. We are not today debating any firm proposals of the Government but discussing the blueprint for the future proposed in the Macrory Report. We came to listen, so that when we take our decision in these vitally important matters - as we must do soon - we can take fully into account the views expressed here.

At the outset may I say this? Although we have discussed over these two days the Macrory Report on local government, we can consider neither the Report nor the whole subject in isolation. The Macrory proposals represent the most recent of a long series of studies and investigations of this subject, or of aspects of it. And as for local government itself, I think it is useful today to recall some striking words which concluded the Nugent Report of 1957 - words to which some of the most prominent men in local government, many of them still active as councillors or officials, subscribed their names. "... it has been our aim", they said, "to ensure that local authorities can effectively fulfil the part allotted to them by Parliament at this stage in the development of Northern Ireland. It is only a stage and not a final position by any means. The part played by local authorities in our public services may well change as new conditions arise, for the obligations of the community to the individual and, we would add, the individual to the community, form an ever-changing pattern. Central government and local government are but two parts of the machinery of State, co-operating under Parliament, with the statutory boards, the voluntary societies, the business community and the whole body of citizens to achieve 'peace, order and good government'." These words may well guide us today.

The need for change, for renewal, for a willingness to meet new conditions with new methods - these things are nothing new in government. I tried to say in a recent speech that "reform" was not something that was invented in 1968 or will

become redundant when a certain package of measures is complete. To reform, to make things better - more efficient, more economical, more free - must be the mainspring of any decent government.

We understand this and our predecessors in government understood it. They understood it when they launched the great experiment of the Northern Ireland Tuberculosis Authority; now almost forgotten, but in its day a brave and immensely successful stroke to cope with an enormous problem of human suffering. They understood it when they set up the Northern Ireland Housing Trust, whose achievements are written in bricks and mortar across the face of modern Ulster. As a government and as a Parliament we have not shrunk in the past from bold innovations in our institutions. The Ulster Transport Authority, succeeded by the new Transport Companies including this autumn the new and promising Airports Company; the Development Council; the Economic Council; the Matthew Plan; the New Towns; the post-War Education Act with its unique arrangements for embracing county and voluntary schools in one educational system; the great advance in the maintained school management since the last Education Act; the Agricultural Marketing Boards; the Agricultural Trust; the New University of Ulster; the Industrial Training Boards; the Local Enterprise Development unit.

I shall not weary the House with a longer catalogue. It is enough to say that in the past we have not feared to be bold, to be radical, to develop new patterns of public administration, to scrap the obsolete and build up the new. And from that process - as my rt hon Friend the Minister of Development reminded us yesterday - the central machinery of government itself has been by no means exempt, for our reforms of 1964 set a pattern for the co-ordination of services which gave a lead to the United Kingdom as a whole.

These are surely the signs of a vigorous, open society, ready at any time to adapt its institutions to changing needs. In every one of these changes our Parliament has made its contribution and has identified itself with the effort of will being made at each particular stage. That contribution has come for both sides of this House.

Most recently we have had the Housing Executive Bill. Here was a radical proposal, which understandably generated some fierce controversy. From many quarters we had prophecies of a negative and irresponsible political battle. Yet, when the matter came to the floor of this House, we saw most hon Members facing up with seriousness and responsibility to the real underlying issue - not one of organisation but of meeting a fundamental human need. We had, of course, criticism as well as support, but much of it was constructive criticism, and the House as a whole endorsed the principle of this reform on Second Reading.

Now we approach a new and even greater challenge. We have before us a Report prepared by men of real distinction of mind and achievement, Ulstermen whose reputation is beyond the reach of criticism, and who had no axe to grind in offering this service to the community.

I am aware of the suggestion that they were hampered by insufficient direct knowledge of local government practice, but I believe this to be misconceived. Men of capacity can apply their minds to the widest range of problems. We do not have to be mothers before we can study the maternity service!

It is a thoughtful and a challenging Report. How do we, as a Government, stand in relation to it?

As of today, we have taken no firm decisions. That was our undertaking and we have kept it. We have not come here with our minds made up.

This does not mean that since the Report was published we have been sitting idly by. While others - local authorities, public bodies, Members of Parliament - have been studying, analysing, assessing Macrory, so have we in all Departments of the Government. We have probed it in depth, considered its implications, tested it by the criteria we think important. Therefore, while we have not yet taken decisions we will, with the further help given by hon Members in this debate, be in a position to do so without any undue delay.

For time is our great concern. Far from having any notion of delay or postponement, our most strenuous endeavours have been directed to seeing how soon the heavy programme can be started and how quickly it can be carried through.

These problems of timing involve considerations of detailed administration, procedures, staff consultations, industrial relations and a host of other matters which cannot be neglected or pushed to one side.

I realise that these are specialised matters much more apparent to the people directly concerned than to others. For that reason some hon Members on the Opposition side of this House with less experience of internal Government business may not fully appreciate the complexity of all the tasks involved here. If they, or indeed any group of hon Members, wish to go into the details at any time with the Minister of Development or any other of our colleagues principally concerned, that can be arranged without any difficulty. This is one of those matters which we ought to conduct at a level above the scoring of political points.

I would now like to turn for a moment to some of the more general issues raised by Macrory, which do not readily fall to any of my Departmental colleagues, such as the future size of this House; the composition of the other place; the whole problem of Committees of the House or of both Houses; and the possibility of changes in the electoral system whether for Stormont or for local authorities based on some form of Proportional Representation.

Our minds are by no means closed on any of these important questions. Indeed we recognise that whatever the future pattern for the administration of regional services, the implications of any major change for the central machinery of government and Parliament may be profound. I will tell the House frankly that at one stage in our deliberations during the Recess we seriously considered a proposition to the effect that these matters ought to be tackled first, before turning to Macrory paper, or at the very least in parallel with the Macrory proposals. Such a course would not be without logic. But in the end we thought it unwise to adopt it, for three reasons. First, Macrory had merely drawn attention to the questions and had not deeply studied them or made recommendations. Secondly, we would be touching here on matters of profound importance whose consideration could not be rushed or skimped. Yet, as I have said, time is our scarcest commodity, for local government re-organisation cannot wait without great damage to the public good. And thirdly, we have still sitting Lord Crowther's Commission on the Constitution, whose recommendations may have implications in all or any of these fields.

Our first priority, then, is to take decisions on the re-organisation of local government and to carry these decisions efficiently, speedily and systematically into effect. But as we do this, we will not be forgetting about these other profoundly important issues. We will be studying all of them within the Government, and we hope for an informed debate upon them in the country. I do not pretend that we can reach early decisions, but as I say our minds are by no means closed to the possibility of further changes which would be in the widest public interest.

On the specific issue of Proportional Representation, to which reference has been made during the debate, I should like to remind the House that we are firmly committed to a fair and impartial drawing of district and ward boundaries, and to single-member wards if the electoral system itself is unchanged. Moreover we have already provided for "one-man, one-vote" in council elections. Hitherto we had taken the view that this should not apply to the filling of casual vacancies, because of the anomaly which would result with members elected on different bases sitting together. However, we have

become increasingly conscious that by-elections to fill casual vacancies have been taking place on an out-of-date Register and we have therefore now decided to ask the House to approve legislation to provide that future casual vacancies will be filled by elections conducted on the new extended Register.

Against this background it should be clear that our electoral system with or without a change to Proportional Representation will be as fair and democratic as any such system anywhere in the world. This does not mean that there is no case for Proportional Representation, but it does mean that the case cannot be argued on the basis that Proportional Representation is a fundamental civil right, and the only way to overcome some manifest injustice. An argument on those lines will surely be utterly sterile, and can only lead the protagonists on both sides into entrenched positions. I would therefore ask hon Members to avoid this negative approach and to consider the question dispassionately and on its merits. The question is a complex and difficult one: a strong case can be argued on both sides, and hon Members will find the Government perfectly ready to listen to both sides of the argument.

In short, the public can rest assured that their Government intends to remain fully on top of the situation, to look well ahead, and to carry forward that continuing review of all our institutions that started long before Macrory and will be going on long after we have adopted, or rejected, or made use of the proposals he has put to us. It is not enough to defend our Constitution; we must go on developing it. It is not enough merely to have our regional Parliament; we must make the fullest possible use of it.

And now I return to some words I used at the beginning of these remarks, when I said that although we had not come to any decisions about specific proposals, we had certain principles clearly fixed in our minds. What are these principles? They are that any reform of local government or of other institutions of government in this country of ours shall be an open, honest and honourable reform, not animated by any sectional or sectarian or political interest, but by a sense of fair dealing and a desire to enlist in the task of government and administration all the human and other resources of Northern Ireland. They are to keep before us what government - be it central or local, be it through Parliament, Council or Board - is all about; making it possible for a free people to shape their own destiny, to live and work in comfort and prosperity and dignity. Any decisions taken which do not measure up to these standards would be no service to the country.

My policy I have often stated; firm and fair government for all the people. I have no more desire to spin words today than I usually have. I wish my tenure of office to be judged by what we do. And so I end by giving this House my personal and unqualified assurance that we shall earnestly weigh up this Debate. We shall have in mind the long-term interests of Ulster as a part of the United Kingdom and of a much wider world. We shall act soon to take and announce firm decisions in principle, to discuss their detailed implementation with interested parties, and then in a sustained programme of action and with, I hope, the co-operation of all concerned, we shall carry them into effect.