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24th February, 1971

Statement on Cross-Border Relations by Major Chichester-Clark M.P.
at Stormont on 24th February, 1971 in reply to a debate on the
Adjournment

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As I have already indicated in my reply to my hon. Friend, I regard Mr. Lynch's statement on policy towards Northern Ireland as an important one which deserves a detailed and well-considered response.

Before I deal in detail with his various statements and proposals may I make some general observations about the relationships existing within these islands? I would be less than candid if I did not say that in my view the situation within Northern Ireland itself is that on which our attention should principally be concentrated. It would be foolish to pretend that we do not face today great problems and great dangers.

What would, I believe, be folly would be to suppose that these problems could be solved and these dangers minimised by discussion of imminent constitutional change - and by this I do not mean change within Northern Ireland, which we have been and are prepared to examine on its merits - but change in Northern Ireland's external relationships. To put it bluntly, I think that a shift of power from Belfast either to London or Dublin would merely cause greater instability and greater danger to life and limb.

I am not saying this because I think Northern Ireland can exist in a vacuum. What happens here has profound effects upon our neighbours - both upon our fellow-citizens in Great Britain and our neighbours in the South. Events in one place interact upon events in another.

We have just seen the Irish Republic passing through a major political upheaval as a direct result of certain attitudes in the Republic to developments here. And in a very real sense, those who confront the gunmen in the streets of Belfast serve the cause of democracy not in Northern Ireland alone but throughout these islands.

(Mr. Cooper: What do you mean by that?)

The Prime Minister: The constitutional position of Northern Ireland as an integral part of the United Kingdom - the position maintained by my party and endorsed by our own electorate - does not necessitate any hostility between ourselves and those who share this island with us. Indeed, let it be clear that the policy at which we aim is one of mutual confidence, friendship and understanding, such as is operated between many neighbouring countries in the world. The Border envisaged by the 1920 Act was no major international frontier. It was no "Emerald Curtain" within these islands. It was others, and not our predecessors, who piled brick upon brick along that wall so that by the end of the day we could scarcely see or comprehend each other.

There were numerous historic opportunities - unfortunately missed opportunities - to reverse that process. There was the Tripartite Agreement of 1925 which was allowed to run into the sands. The chance to find common cause against the enemies of all mankind was passed aside between 1939 and 1945. Some years ago, my predecessor ventured upon a further initiative to create a neighbourly relationship. Practical exchanges followed, in which various Ministers took part. I myself, when Minister of Agriculture, met my opposite number, a certain Mr. Blaney.

(Mr. Cooper: We remember.)

The Prime Minister: I, for my part, was setting aside our political and constitutional differences -

(Mr. Cooper: Pig smuggling.)

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The Prime Minister - in the interests of the practical welfare of farmers North and South of the Border. But in retrospect, how are we to judge his motive and those of others who took part in these discussions?

Moreover, let those who have conducted the Government of the Irish Republic all down the years examine their consciences and ask themselves the question: have they really been concerned to create in the South the kind of State with which a neighbourly relationship could be developed? When successive politicians in Dublin have talked about "our people" in the North, to whom have they been referring? Not, I would suggest, to the historic community which values its links with Britain. These links have been brushed aside as a thing of no account. People who commemorate Easter 1916 have not had the courage to say that the 36th Ulster Division decimated at the Somme in that same year had a concept of patriotism too - and patriotism is a word which has often been in the mouths of Dublin politicians.

So much for the past; but what of the future? Mr. Lynch continues to talk in terms of delay in the implementation of reform. Such generalisations are rubbish. I say without fear of contradiction that we have carried through with determination and energy that programme for the benefit of the whole people of Northern Ireland to which we set our hand. Can the Government of the Irish Republic point in recent times to any comparable surge of progressive legislation?

(Mr. Currie: Who was responsible for that?)

The Prime Minister: Let us have no nonsense about this. The social conditions in Northern Ireland, unsatisfactory as they may be in some respects, far surpass those in the Republic. How do our housing programmes compare? How do our systems of education match up?

(Mr. O'Reilly: We have heard all that before.)

The Prime Minister: How, indeed, does one compare a Constitution which specifically debars the giving of a preference by reason of religion with one which declares the special position of a particular Church? How does one account for the flourishing of the Northern Roman Catholic minority, while the Southern Protestant minority withers away?

(Mr. Taylor: Hear, hear.)

The Prime Minister: Above all, precisely what in any specific terms are the people of Northern Ireland to gain from assimilation into an Irish Republic? I see no prospect of more prosperity, more freedom, more dignity.

(Mr. Devlin: That is the landed gentry now.)

The Prime Minister: This, at any rate, is the view of the majority here. What of the minority? Our task is to show them, too, that their best interests lie within the existing constitutional framework. I accept that any man is likely to say: let me be a first-class citizen in a poorer community rather than a second-class citizen in a richer one. That is why it is the policy of this Government that there shall be no second-class citizenship for anyone in Northern Ireland.

(Mr. Currie: That is a pretty new one.)

The Prime Minister: I accept, too, that this means something more than mere fairness. It means a chance to participate at every level of society and in every aspect of our institutions.

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(Mr. Currie: What does the Prime Minister mean by "participate"?)

The Prime Minister: There is, of course, a difficulty here for as long as politics divides mainly along religious lines. To me Unionism is not a sectarian but a political faith, and I hope the day will come when more members of the religious minority will profess that faith with me. However, I realise that these things will not happen quickly. In the meantime we accept that the health of this society depends on the creation of new opportunities for participation by all. That is not necessarily an obligation only for us in Northern Ireland.

In the course of his speech Mr. Lynch quoted to applause some words from a speech which Yeats made in the Dublin Senate in 1925:

"It is perhaps the deepest political passion within this nation that the North and South be united into one nation".

(Mr. Fitt (Belfast, Dock): The Prime Minister is trying to confuse Cathal Goulding.)

The Prime Minister: But quotations without their full context are sometimes hazardous. For Yeats made these comments in a Senate debate on the freedom to divorce, and towards the end of that speech he used these words which Mr. Lynch did not choose to quote:

"I think it is tragic that within three years of this country gaining its independence we should be discussing a measure which a minority of this nation considers to be grossly offensive. I am proud to consider myself a typical man of that minority. We are no petty people. We are one of the great stocks of Europe".

Yes, indeed, and we who represent a minority in this island but a majority here in Northern Ireland have seen other measures go forward which we would also regard as grossly offensive.

The most important of these are not those sectarian provisions of the Southern Constitution whose possible removal at some indefinite point in time Mr. Lynch refers to as an "olive branch". If those things were right and fair and just, why were they not done long ago in the interests of the minority within the Irish Republic itself?

(Mr. Fitt: Why were they not done here long ago? Before 1968?)

The Prime Minister: No, Sir, the real cause of offence is to be found elsewhere, in those provisions of the Republic's Constitution which claim the incorporation of Northern Ireland in the territory of the Republic and in her Nationality and Citizenship Act of 1956 unilaterally conferring "Irish" citizenship on most of the people of Northern Ireland. It is precisely on this central issue that the Republic's attitude remains as inflexible as ever.

Mr. Lynch goes a very long way along the road of common sense and logic, and I applaud every step he takes. He referred in his speech to "the bully boys with the bombs, with the tar and feathers". He pointed out that the Border could not be wished away, that the Border could not be shot away, but that it could be removed by agreement between Irishmen, North and South. At this time and to such an audience these words took courage. The sad thing is that the whole atmosphere of Irish relationships could be transformed by one further, simple, logical step along the same road.

(Mr. Cooper: Hear, hear.)

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The Prime Minister: This would be to drop the pretence that, as things stand today, the Irish Government have any jurisdiction here and thus to return to the honest and realistic position taken by Mr. Cosgrave's Government in 1925. No one asks or expects Mr. Lynch and his party or the great majority of people in the Republic to shed the aspiration that one day, in amity, Ireland will be united. We ask simply to have it recognised and acknowledged that we have an equal right to take a different view, a view no less moral, no less responsible, no less patriotic.

But first things first: let us heal the deep divisions in Northern Ireland society without which even a policy of good neighbourliness is made impossible. Then, and only then, can we look at any olive branch and see whether it is firmly rooted in the earth or whether, like previous olive branches, it withers away in the first chilly wind.