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Extract from speech made by Mr. William Whitelaw M.P.
British Secretary of State for Northern Ireland,
moving the Second Reading of the Northern Ireland
(Temporary Provisions) Bill, 1972 in the House of
Commons.

As a start, I must explain why I believe that the Bill is necessary and why the British Government and this Parliament should take on this extra responsibility. As a basis, we must never forget that Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom and that British Governments of all parties have pledged themselves to the maintenance of that position so long as it is the wish of the majority in Northern Ireland. No British Government can stand aside if there are threats to law and order in any part of the United Kingdom. That is why the Labour Government sent British troops to Northern Ireland in 1969, and why they have been maintained there in increasing numbers since. Indeed, it is why our soldiers have so tragically lost their lives in the call of duty.

It is fair here to pay a tribute which I believe the House would wish to pay to our troops. I am perfectly convinced that no other army in the world could conceivably have carried out with so much discretion and patience the sort of duties that we in this Parliament have placed upon our Army. But this Parliament equally has a duty to ensure that troops are not placed in an intolerable position and are not given an impossible task. We all want to ensure that violence and terrorism are ended. I am certain that this is the longing - indeed, in many cases the desperate longing - of the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland. There cannot and will not be any surrender to violence nor any relaxation of efforts to bring terrorism and intimidation to an end.

I do not believe that violence and terrorism of this sort can be defeated by purely military means when a considerable section of the community feel themselves in support of the terrorists. No one can deny that the I.R.A. has been gaining in support, both active and passive, from the Catholic minority. Yet I am convinced that many of these people, as Cardinal Conway said on television last night, want violence to end and peace to come. Some say that support for the gunman is due entirely to intimidation. I accept that there is intimidation but I do not agree that it is the fundamental reason. The cause is surely to be found in the feelings of some despair amongst the minority about their position in the community. Whether that is justified or not is not an issue. The fact is that these feelings exist.

The fresh start which the Bill can provide must be used to promote feelings of tolerance, understanding, fairness and impartiality. If it can do that, then moderate opinion in the minority can be weaned away from the gunman. Then, and in my judgment only then, can the terrorists effectively be defeated and violence ended.

My second reason for the new approach concerns the responsibility for security and law and order. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister explained last night, that was the point of difference between the British and the Northern Irish Governments. We took the view that with a prolonged state of emergency and a very large number of British troops employed the division of responsibility between Belfast and Westminster was unsatisfactory in principle. We in this Parliament have responsibility for the troops, and internationally we have been held accountable for all that has happened. In these circumstances we believed we should

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have the full power. Mr. Faulkner and his colleagues could not accept that and said that they would resign rather than carry on in such a situation. In spite of all the difficulties, I am convinced it is right to end the division between power and responsibility. These are the reasons why my colleagues and I believe the Bill is necessary. I am absolutely certain that to have shrunk from this Decision in the present troubled state of Northern Ireland would have been an abdication of responsibility by the British Government and, indeed, by the British Parliament.

I should now say a word about my visit to Northern Ireland last Saturday, because it is important in the context of how the new arrangements under the Bill can and should be operated. I saw the Governor, whose help and wise counsel in a difficult situation have been of considerable value, and I thanked him for it. I saw the Northern Ireland permanent secretaries and I expressed to them that it would be my wish that we should all work as one team. I received from them the expressions of loyalty which one would expect from the British Civil Service in the highest traditions, and I was very glad to have them. I saw the leaders of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, and again I received the same expressions of loyalty which one would expect to receive from a British police force, again in the highest standards of our police. Again I was extremely glad to receive them, because no one should underestimate the difficulties and problems that these people have faced in this situation. I saw the G.O.C. and discussed with him the military position, and I was very much impressed with his immense grasp of the situation.

I was left in no doubt that there would be a most serious strike yesterday and today. We shall all much regret the hardship and inconvenience which have been caused throughout Northern Ireland. But one must be generous and remember that the Protestant majority have been extremely patient when their lives have been seriously disrupted by violence. They have shown great restraint, and no one in this House should forget that. Therefore, one can understand, even if one cannot accept, the feelings which they have expressed in the two-day strike. I hope that once this is over they will settle down and seek with all concerned a new solution.

It is important when considering these factors to remember what this country, this Parliament and the House of Commons have provided, not only in terms of our troops but in many other ways, for the Northern Irish economy. Since 1970 we have given extra financial support which overall represents an additional £100 per head of the population. These are extremely important figures which must be remembered in the context of what we have done for an area which is part of the United Kingdom.

I now wish to consider the basic purposes of the Bill. In the first instance it is temporary and will operate for one year. Stormont will be prorogued and not dissolved. This is a year to be used for talks with all concerned about the best arrangements for the future. I will use every endeavour in that time to promote such talks, and I will spend as much time as I can meeting and discussing with all those who wish to be concerned with the future of Northern Ireland. Naturally, in all this I hope for the close co-operation and help of all parties in this House and of all hon. and right hon. Members.

I should now show how I intend to proceed if the Bill is passed, because that is something which the House should know. I wish first to repeat the assurance about the Border. Under the 1949 Act the Border is still in position. Clearly, the assurance stands absolutely that Northern Ireland will remain part of the United Kingdom so long as the majority so decide. In addition to that

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assurance, we have the proposals for a plebiscite, which add to the assurance I gave, and that assurance stands in the name of all parties in the House. Naturally, I do not want to be committed on the timing of the plebiscite until we can assess the situation fully.

I repeat the assurance that close co-operation between the Army and the police in the campaign against terrorism will be carried forward with the utmost determination. While I will do all in my power to reduce tension and promote tolerance and understanding as a basis for peace, I will have no mercy on those who, by continuing with violence, seek to frustrate those aims.

We have promised in our statement that internment will be phased out. We must still be free to intern if there is a clear case for internment on security grounds. I intend to review all the files of the present cases personally. I must take complete responsibility for the decisions I make. I will take those decisions with complete impartiality and fairness, with the paramount needs of security very much in mind. If I can find some cases that can be brought to trial, they will be brought to trial, but I must arouse no false hopes until I have studied the situation. I must stress with the utmost force the basic, simple principle that the sooner the violence ends the sooner can internment be ended.

Mr. R. Chichester-Clark (Londonderry): My right hon. Friend refers to the assurances implicit in the 1949 Act about Northern Ireland remaining part of the United Kingdom, but can he give the assurance firmly that there is no part of a subsection of the Bill which has the effect of removing those very assurances?

Mr. Whitelaw: The assurance is absolutely solid and reinforced by the proposals on the plebiscite. That is my clear understanding of the position.

Rev. Ian Paisley (Antrim, North): There is great concern in Northern Ireland about one subsection which says that resolutions that could be passed by the House of Commons in Northern Ireland could now be passed by the Secretary of State or his Commission. As a resolution of the Northern Ireland Parliament is the resolution that safeguards the constitution under the 1949 Ireland Act, there is serious concern about that. Will the right hon. Gentleman look into the matter and give us an assurance on it in Committee?

Mr. Whitelaw: I will certainly look into that matter. I give the positive assurance that there is no question, and can be no question, as both parties in this House have pledged that Northern Ireland can cease to be part of the United Kingdom unless the majority so desire.

Mr. Simon Mahon (Bootle): The right hon. Gentleman has just said that when violence ends internment will end. That is the crux of the whole problem. Could he expand on that?

Mr. Whitelaw: I must say no more at this stage. I have something to say, and there are a number of other speeches to be made. I do not want to give way too much.

Perhaps I could now say a few words about the Commission. I do not think this has been properly understood in all quarters. I wish to make it clear that the Commission will assist by way of advice and consultation, but neither the Commission collectively nor individual members of it acting as such will discharge any executive functions in Northern Ireland. There is no question of the Government of Northern Ireland being placed in Commission. The executive power will rest wholly with the Secretary of State as a member of the British Cabinet answerable to this House.

All of us, I think, would wish our relations with our near neighbour to be warm and friendly, as is natural between two countries who have been closely linked in so many ways. The initiative taken by the British Government a few weeks ago is a step forward in seeking a lasting solution to the remaining problem in this historic relationship.

There is freedom of movement and constant traffic between us. There have been for many years exchanges, contacts and consultations at every level of Government and throughout our social and political institutions. Britain is, and is likely to remain in the immediate future - even in the EEC - our most important supplier, our most important customer and our most important source of tourism and investment.

We are Britain's third most important customer after the United States and Germany. We are more important to her as a market even than France which has 16 times our population. And we are now likely to go into the European Communities together.

It is a pity then that the problem of the fears and loyalties of the Unionist population of the North should come between us for so long. There must surely be some better way of settling the old issues of relations between the peoples of these two islands, and some better way of meeting all the legitimate fears and concerns of the Unionist community. Fifty years have, after all taught us something - about the folly of trying to meet those fears in a way which brought separation and instability and also about the naturally easy and friendly relations which can exist between the peoples of the two islands when such relations are not subject to any constraints. A solution reflecting the broader and more comprehensive national identity is, I believe, the only way to bring peace to Ireland.

As regards this first most vital circle of interest for our foreign relations such a settlement would meet all three of the concerns to which I have referred. It would serve our national interest - not in a narrow sense but by bringing peace and stability at last to our island; it would serve our community of interest with Britain which is, and should be, real and close; and it would, I believe, promote values which are shared by Irish people of every tradition at their best and most generous.