

NATIONAL ARCHIVES**IRELAND**

Reference Code:	2003/17/289
Title:	Report in the Irish Times of a speech made by William Whitelaw MP, British Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, when addressing the Conservative Party Conference at Blackpool, in which he discussed the transition to direct rule in Northern Ireland and the current state of politics, economic and social life, British Army operations in no-go areas in Londonderry, anti-terrorism measures, British relations with Ireland and the issue of a united Ireland, a forthcoming plebiscite on the border, and plans for the publication of a Green Paper.
Creation Date(s):	12 October 1972
Level of description:	Item
Extent and medium:	6 pages
Creator(s):	Department of Foreign Affairs
Access Conditions:	Open

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11th October, 1972

Text of speech made by Mr. William Whitelaw, M.P., British Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, when addressing the Conservative Party Conference at Blackpool (as reported in the Irish Times of October 12th 1972.

This motion has given this conference the opportunity to discuss a very worrying and serious situation in part of the United Kingdom. I entirely agree with Mrs. McClure. She is quite right. It is a part of the United Kingdom. Her Majesty's Government recognise that. That is why we have taken the task in the way we have. I recognise it, and that is why I feel I am doing a duty to a part of the United Kingdom by taking this job, and I believe that this is something which everyone throughout the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland, should properly recognise about the position of Her Majesty's Government.

As I have learned in six short months in Northern Ireland, there is always a great danger that emotion takes over from reason and that fiction takes over from fact. I want to face this conference with facts, and to do so with as little emotion as possible, because over these six months I have been stirred by the enormous emotions, one way and the other, but I have always realised that if it is my task to try to end bitterness and hatred it is no use allowing bitterness and hatred to well up in my own heart.

Therefore, when I am attacked, and brutally attacked, as sometimes obviously I am, I must keep quiet, keep my...council, and carry on carefully and patiently, because that is the only way if we are to overcome bitterness and hatred.

In March, Her Majesty's Government decided to take direct rule in Northern Ireland temporarily. This decision, as has been pointed out in this debate by Captain Henderson and others, was resented. Nevertheless, it must be pointed out to this conference that it was supported by an overwhelming majority of the United Kingdom Parliament, by a very large body of public opinion throughout the United Kingdom, which we must not neglect, a very large body of opinion throughout the whole world, and indeed a substantial minority of people in all sections of the community in Northern Ireland.

Since that date, as Secretary of State, I have spent literally hundreds of hours listening to the views of people of all shades of opinion in Northern Ireland about their society and its complex problems. I have been able to do this because I have had the chance and the good luck to be able to leave the detailed administration to David Windlesham, who is in Belfast today, Paul Channon, who is here, and David Howell, at the end of the platform. They have carried through this administration in what has been regarded - and I have been told on all sides - in a remarkably efficient manner, and this party and this conference should be grateful to them for that.

No one over the centuries who had studied or had responsibility for Irish affairs has ever been unwise enough to claim any full understanding of them. But it is only right that I should give you the impressions which I have given, as Nicholas Bennett did, in talking to a very wide selection of people throughout the community. I think I am entitled to claim that in this regard I have had an absolutely unrivalled opportunity, because I have been able, as a person coming from outside, to hear the views of all sorts of people throughout the community without having any

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prejudice myself one way or the other. As that is an opportunity which has not been granted to anybody else, it is right that I should tell the conference the results of my impressions.

My impressions were not formed after some brief visit, some chance conversation, or a speech to an audience who you know will agree with every word you say. I found a society deeply divided and estranged, but only at each extreme full of real bitterness and hate. I would agree entirely with Mr. Sacks-Martin, who so ably moved the motion, that cooperation between all the people in the middle is the vital need in Northern Ireland at the present time, and in the long run responsibility of those of moderate opinion, whatever side of the religious fence they may be on. That is the answer. That is what we must work for.

Nor should it be imagined that all is strife in Northern Ireland, that everywhere there are deep divisions. As Mrs. McClure very properly pointed out, in many country areas Protestants and Roman Catholics live happily and peacefully together. There are many examples of outstanding and devoted community relations work from religious and other leaders. Nor can one write off the other outstanding achievements in much of Northern Ireland. Despite the strife, in industry there have been fewer days lost through industrial disputes than in the rest of the United Kingdom - many less. Industrial productivity is much higher than in the rest of the United Kingdom. These facts should be recognised. I am glad to say that David Howell has just been on a visit to Germany to try to attract German investment to Northern Ireland, and I believe that even in present circumstances he has succeeded in doing so, and this will help with our very serious unemployment problem.

But it is true that, now that the years of violence have taken their toll, the majority of law-abiding citizens, whatever community they come from, are fearful, depressed and frustrated. Thugs and law-breakers, with little or no interest in a Northern Ireland in the United Kingdom on the one hand, or indeed a united Ireland on the other, and certainly no interest in religion of any sort or kind, have used the basic conflict as an excuse for criminal action of all sorts and kinds, including many of the assassinations which we have seen in recent weeks. The desperate need is to build up our police force in Northern Ireland, the Royal Ulster Constabulary, and to do everything we can to that end, because that is the way that law-and-order must be kept in Northern Ireland in future.

Nevertheless, behind all this there is a division in the society, not simply about the basic constitutional position, but also about responsibility and power within Northern Ireland itself. This situation cannot be solved by military or political means alone. Nor, as Gerry Wade very properly pointed out, is there any quick, simple or logical solution, as is sometimes suggested. Indeed, if there had been, no doubt someone over the last 300 years would have found it, and found it long ago.

When one talks about the troubles of the last three or four years it must be questioned without going over history, which is all too easy to do after the period of talking in Ireland, how was it that the situation arose in 1969 which has led to all the violence we have had since? That is something which everyone must examine honestly and openly in his own heart, because that is the only way in which we shall get the right basis for the future.

This problem can only be tackled with three qualities: courage, utter determination and patience. There is no short cut. It cannot be solved by military or political means alone. It must be solved by a combination of the two.

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I must speak first from the military side, because unless violence is stopped all else will fail. I would like to join with Mr. Sacks-Martin, Norman St. John-Stevas, and others in paying the most tremendous tribute to our young soldiers in Northern Ireland. They have carried out the most amazing task, which I do not believe any other army in the world could possibly have achieved. That does not mean, alas, that the G.O.C. and I do not spend many hours listening to complaints of all sorts and kinds from all sections of the community in Northern Ireland about the actions of the soldiers here or there. It is very grieving when one knows the provocations and the difficulties. We examine every one with scrupulous care, because we are absolutely determined to show that our soldiers and we are not impartial between men of violence and law-abiding citizens, but utterly impartial between all law-abiding citizens, and utterly opposed to men of violence, from wherever they may come. It may be grieving to have the complaints when one knows the achievements of our soldiers. It is, needless to say, more distressing still to Her Majesty's Government, with our much increased responsibilities over recent months and the extra troops and casualties we have suffered from sniping, when one feels one has some special responsibility about it.

I would like to come back to one point which occurred earlier this year, which is of vital importance. When I first went to Northern Ireland, the great argument concerned the famous, or infamous, no-go area, particularly in the Creggan and Bogside of Londonderry. They were a major source of complaint, a major source of indignation to law-abiding citizens in Northern Ireland and everywhere throughout the United Kingdom. This situation, which had been building up for year's clearly could not go on. The simple question facing Her Majesty's Government was one of timing. It was essential, first, to persuade the civilian population in the areas concerned that the gunman in their midst did not deserve their support. Only then could one hope that they would not physically obstruct our troops when they went in.

I must tell this conference that if they had lain down on the streets in front of the vehicles as they went in, then there would have been substantial military and civilian casualties, certainly amongst innocent women and children who had nothing to do with the conflict at all. If there are any people in this hall who would suggest for one minute that they would have been prepared, in a position of responsibility, to stand back and not take action to protect the lives of innocent women and children, they are entitled to their view, and I hope they will stand up and show it. Accusation and counter-accusation would have followed, and the clearance of the areas, even if achieved at all, would have been bought at an intolerably high price. As it was, Operation Motorman was carried through with an absolute minimum of casualties, the no-go areas are clear, and a major military security requirement has been met within four months of Her Majesty's Government taking direct rule - something that had been building up for years before that. I believe we are entitled to claim that as a very considerable success, both from a military and from a political point of view.

Since then, wanted men have been rounded up in very considerable numbers, and some leading Provisionals who had escaped earlier in the year or last year have recently been recaptured. Some 250 charges involving violence have been mounted in the courts, and a considerable number of gunmen have been killed or wounded. More than 400 weapons, ranging from machine-guns to pistols, have been seized, together with 62,000 rounds of ammunition, 10 tons of explosives - enough to make many hundreds of deadly bombs.

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In this connection it must be said that the weapons problem in Northern Ireland is not that of legally-held arms, but of those held illegally. There is no evidence at all that any shooting or killing has been carried out with any of the legally-held arms, the vast majority of which are shotguns in a country area, which I believe to be right. There are, indeed, no licences for machine-guns or the rifles which have been used to kill the soldiers and civilians. That must be said.

In order to pursue this still further, we have found that the ordinary processes of the law, even used to the utmost, will not suffice to take all those men off the streets who we believe should be off, particularly those who do not take part in terrorism themselves but who organise it. So we are setting up, first of all, a commission to look into the problem of special courts as they should be conducted for the future. The Ulster Unionist policy document itself believed this was right. We have decided that we shall set up this commission at once under Lord Diplock, but in the meantime, while it is working, it is still very important that we have at our command some means of taking people off the streets and keeping off the streets some of those who we believe would be a danger to the community if they were released. For that reason we are setting up tribunals as a temporary measure, and, if I may say so, as a further clear earnest of our utter determination in the action against terrorism and violence.

These will be set up as soon as possible. I believe they are a better means of deciding whether a man should be off the streets or free than is the action of one single Minister in any Government. I believe these are right. We shall bring the proposals before Parliament very shortly indeed. Therefore, I would like to assure Mr. Patti, Captain Henderson and others that we, with all these means, are going to pursue military action against the gunmen with the utmost determination at our command. There is absolutely no truth in the argument that the Army's hands have been tied behind their backs in any way at all. There is no such sign at all. We are searching, as the Army want to and as it is right to do, on information received, and not in a blanket way. Anyone who knows operations will know that blanket searches over a whole area without information are valueless and end in making you look ridiculous and absurd. That is not the right answer. The right answer is searches on information. These we are doing as hard as we can, and on every possible occasion. That is the answer to those who say that the Army are being held back.

Then there are those who say that the answer to it all is to find some means of being more ruthless with the Government of the Republic. I hope the conference will ponder very carefully the history of Ireland over the centuries before they believe that, in fact, entering into some direct confrontation, with one part of Ireland would lead to a satisfactory solution to the other, because history is wholly, totally and entirely against them, and in the modern world it will not and cannot work.

On the political side it is essential to reassure those who fear that they might be sold into a united Ireland against their will. Despite some headlines to the contrary, Mr. Wilson and the Labour Party did reaffirm their pledges on this. I do so again today on behalf of Her Majesty's Government. There can be no change in the constitutional position of Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom unless by the will of the majority.

Equally, of course, if the majority of the people in Northern Ireland were to opt for a united Ireland no British Government would stand in their way. But here I must simply say something to all those who want a united Ireland and who think they can get it by violence and by force, who think that they can somehow bomb the majority of the Protestant community into a united Ireland. I say to them that they cannot,

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that they will not and that there is no possible chance of their doing it. I say to them that the longer they go on with the violence the further away will be the objectives they seek to promote. That is something we should say, and which everyone in Northern Ireland should say with the utmost vigour. It is surely in this way that we shall in the end discourage violence. I hope that message will go out from everyone here today.

I reinforce this assurance about the will of the majority. A plebiscite on the Border will be held as promised - I assure Captain Henderson of this - as soon as possible after the necessary legislation can be passed through Parliament. It will be held as soon as it can be. I am naturally subject to the will of the British House of Commons and of the House of Lords as to how quickly that legislation gets through, but as quickly as it can be done the plebiscite on the Border will be held. There is absolutely no truth in some of the suggestions I have heard that this is being deliberately delayed in some way or other, and I have particular pleasure in taking this opportunity to say just that.

Meanwhile, although I would much have preferred to have held a plebiscite before the local elections, my colleagues and I have decided that it is impossible further to delay the local elections, because, with common consent, a new system was set up by the previous Government at Stormont and endorsed by all the parties in the United Kingdom. That new system must operate by April 1st, 1973, if uncertainties, unfairness to staff and a breakdown in local government are to be avoided. These elections will therefore be held on December 6th.

Following the Darlington conference, where a most valuable dialogue took place, Her Majesty's Government will be publishing a Green Paper for Parliament as soon as possible. Here I would like to pay tribute to all who decided to come to Darlington and talk. Naturally, I wish more had come, but I am extremely grateful to those who did come and put forward their proposals in a most reasoned way. I acknowledge the care with which Mr. Faulkner and the Ulster Unionist Party put forward their proposals, and I acknowledge also the contributions made by the Alliance Party and the Northern Ireland Labour Party, both of which also put forward comprehensive proposals. The Green Paper will be the basis of further consultation and discussion, which I believe to be right, leading as quickly as possible thereafter to substantive legislation. I am quite certain, as Mr. St. John-Stevas pointed out, that it is essential to remove uncertainties about the future as early as possible and as soon as we can do so. But I believe equally that a Green Paper, a further process of consultation and discussion, and then very quickly forward after that, is the right way of proceeding on the political front.

So much, then, for the military and political action. But, as we have learned in this debate, we must not forget the deeper emotions on which this whole problem is based, dating back over years of history. So long as the majority of the people of Northern Ireland so desire, all the people of Northern Ireland share United Kingdom citizenship with the rest of us. That great privilege which we enjoy carries with it rights and responsibilities. The people of Northern Ireland must not forget their responsibilities. In return, as part of their rights, we in the rest of the United Kingdom have a clear and unmistakable duty to them. Her Majesty's Government did not assume direct responsibility in Northern Ireland to run away in the face of difficulties. Quite the reverse. We took the hard course of duty.

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Whatever our critics may say, no one can deny that we had the courage to do what we believed to be right in the interests of all the people of Northern Ireland, and if you believe something to be right, however difficult it is, your duty as a Government is to take that course, and that is what we did.

I hope that this motion will be supported, and I want to tell the conference why I believe that it should be supported on the basis I have been speaking about. While I understand that there are differences, while I understand that there are people with deep feelings about the past, while there may be some who have doubts about some of the policies that are being pursued - and anyone who has a responsibility in Ireland would be a very brave man if he did not from time to time have to face a choice between desperate evils, and perhaps some people may think of that as well, for it is true - what I want this conference and the country to do is to send a message to all the people in Northern Ireland that will tell them: "Whatever may be the trials, the troubles or even the dangers, we will not desert you. We will do our duty to you all without fear or favour".

It is only on that basis that violence can be ended, and peace and prosperity restored to an unhappy part of the United Kingdom.
