

NATIONAL ARCHIVES**IRELAND**

Reference Code:	2003/17/292
Title:	Statement made in the House of Commons by William Whitelaw MP, British Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, on the occasion of the ending of the IRA [Irish Republican Army] ceasefire. Statements by Merlyn Rees MP, William Francis Deedes MP, John Wentworth Pardoe MP, Stanley Raymond McMaster MP, Gerry Fitt MP, Duncan Edwin Sandys MP, Stanley Orme MP, John Alec Biggs-Davison MP, Harold Wilson MP, Ronald Bell MP, Albert Edward Patrick Duffy MP, David James MP, and Edward Lucas Gardner MP.
Creation Date(s):	10 July, 1972
Level of description:	Item
Extent and medium:	7 pages
Creator(s):	Department of Foreign Affairs
Access Conditions:	Open

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Statement made in the House of Commons by Mr. William Whitelaw MP British Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, on the occasion of the ending of the IRA ceasefire. Statements by other members are also included.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. William Whitelaw): I will, with permission, make a further statement about Northern Ireland.

I wish to apologise at once to the Opposition for not giving the general courtesy of a statement to them in time. I am afraid that I have only just this moment arrived back from Northern Ireland on the aeroplane.

The House will have heard that the cessation of hostilities in Northern Ireland announced by the Provisional Wing of the IRA of which I told the House on Thursday, 22nd June, was ended by it on Sunday evening after fire had been opened on British troops. Security forces had been subjected for some time to assault short of shooting, arising out of communal argument about housing, a matter that had already been the subject of anxious discussion and about which a further meeting had been arranged. It was only after the Army units had been fired on that they returned fire.

This incident has been seized on by the Provisional Wing of the IRA as a reason for ending its declared truce.

That truce had been discussed by me with some leaders of the Provisional Wing of the IRA on 7th July. I arranged to see them because I have, as the House well knows, discussed these grievous Northern Ireland problems with representatives of many shades of opinion. Any action that I could take that would save life or avoid further damage to property seemed to me should be taken.

The IRA leaders complained that I had given nothing in return for their cessation of hostilities. They made demands that I could not accept ~~but~~ that I agreed to consider in case some peaceful way forward might be found.

The House may be interested to know what these demands were.

They called on the British Government to recognise publicly that it is the right of the whole of the people of Ireland acting as a unit to decide the future of Ireland.

They called on the British Government immediately to declare their intention to withdraw all British forces from Irish soil, such withdrawal to be completed on or before 1st January, 1975. Pending such withdrawal British forces must be withdrawn immediately from sensitive areas.

They called for a general amnesty for all political prisoners in Irish and British gaols, for all internees and detainees and for all persons on the wanted list. In this regard they recorded their dissatisfaction that internment had not been ended in response to their initiative in declaring a suspension of offensive operations.

Before I could even discuss these matters with my Cabinet colleagues, the fragile truce was broken, as I have already set out.

I deeply regret that the Provisional Wing of the IRA has resorted to violence on the basis of one incident which could have been solved peacefully. I hope that it is not too late for even the Provisional IRA to think again and for the whole Northern Irish community to see the need for progress without violence.

Mr. Merlyn Rees: We know that the right hon. Gentleman has flown to and from Belfast today in order to report to the House, and that illustrates, in the midst of the very difficult job he has to do, his concern for the House of Commons. We on this side of the House accept the fact that he could not, therefore, afford us the general courtesy of giving us full notice of what he had to say.

Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that, whilst it is a statement of the obvious that this part of the policy, which we support and which led to the truce, is at an end, we know that at this dark moment sectarian violence is a real possibility, that we must still speak to that majority in the north of Ireland which wants peace, that if that fails there will be civil war, and that the more everyone in the north of Ireland realises this the more readily, perhaps, sanity will return?

Is the right hon. Gentleman further aware that, while we appreciate the need not to over-react to events in deciding the next steps in Northern Ireland, we want the security role in Northern Ireland made absolutely clear so that everyone knows what reaction will come in the face of the two armies, Protestant and Catholics, majority and minority - whichever is the best way of putting it - which confronts the British Army, particularly in the face of the Protestant marching season which begins this week?

If not today, will the right hon. Gentleman tell us more of what happened at the Lenadoon Estate confrontation which was the excuse for what has happened?

With regard to the right hon. Gentleman's statement about the demands of the IRA, on the one point of unification it again shows a complete lack of reality about the political needs of the North. Has the right hon. Gentleman noted that Mr. Faulkner today made an appeal to the majority to keep the peace? Is it not a pity that he did not make it last week?

Mr. Whitelaw: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the helpful way in which he has approached a very difficult situation. I would not accept that the policy of reconciliation of the communities in Northern Ireland either is at an end or can ever be at an end, because, frankly, there is no other way forward. These two communities have got to live together in peace in the future, and nothing can ever shake that fact. The sooner everyone realises it, particularly the extremists on both sides the better. I regret that extremists on both sides make the task of anyone seeking reconciliation extremely difficult.

As for the security role of the British forces, their role as always, will be to keep the peace and to prevent sectarian violence. I should make it clear - although I can go into further detail later - that the problem concerning housing in Belfast has, on both sides in recent days, become more acute. There has been extreme intimidation in both communities. I therefore set up a Public Protection Agency to do everything I could to prevent intimidation and to encourage those families in difficult areas to remain against it. In the particular instance involved, discussions took place with my officials and all those concerned yesterday in an effort to find a means of solving what was a difficult problem in a fringe area. It was agreed at the end of that meeting that another meeting would be held tonight to resolve that problem. I regret that there were those who were not prepared to wait for the meeting to night and immediately demanded that the Catholic families must be moved in at once. It was the view of the security forces that such action would undoubtedly have led immediately to sectarian conflict. That being their view, they were bound, in their duty, to resist it, which they did. That is how the truce, I regret to say, was finally broken.

I think that answers the hon. Gentleman's main points.

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Mr. Deedes: Is my right hon. Friend aware that, while we are all acutely conscious of the special difficulties confronting him, one grave consequence of this development will be increased risks for our security forces. Will my right hon. Friend bear in mind that public opinion will be uneasy lest those forces be placed by their orders at any disadvantage?

Mr. Whitelaw: Yes, certainly. I am extremely conscious of what my right hon. Friend says. I give him the assurance that they will not be placed at a disadvantage. I am bound to point out the desperately difficult role that they undoubtedly perform in keeping the peace. If extremists on all sides threaten them both ways, this is the great danger for them; but they will not be inhibited by their orders.

Mr. Pardoe: Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that in all quarters of the House this will be regarded as a tragic situation and that all British people will become increasingly bewildered by what is going on in Northern Ireland? Is he absolutely certain that in this situation British people in the near future can any longer find a solution in Northern Ireland? Will he not rule out the possibility of involving the United Nations in this affair?

Mr. Whitelaw: I note what the hon. Gentleman says. For my part, having been given the job, I will soldier through. Until I am relieved or until someone else is required I will soldier through, as is my duty to this country and to this House. If the British Government cannot solve this problem I do not believe anyone else will.

Mr. McMaster: Is my right hon. Friend aware that those who have suffered 400 murders in Northern Ireland in three years feel that it is totally wrong and must always be wrong to attempt to talk or negotiate with those who have got the blood of these people on their hands?

Is he not also aware that what we require of the security forces is not just that they should keep law and order, but justice? Justice must be enforced by the Government. Is my right hon. Friend aware that unless the Government are prepared to bring justice to Northern Ireland, those outraged members of the population who have seen 400 of their fellow countrymen murdered in a grizzly fashion, including the two Orr brothers last week, 7,000 mutilated, and much of our industry destroyed, will take the law into their own hands?

Mr. Whitelaw: In reply to my hon. Friend's first point, I certainly am not prepared to apologise to this House or to the country or to anyone else for any action which I took in the feeling that I might be able to save lives and prevent damage to property.

Mr. McMaster: We are talking of murder.

Mr. Whitelaw: If I have to talk to anyone at all in order honourably and properly to follow that course, I will certainly do so.

As for the other points raised by my hon. Friend, I do not intend to exacerbate the situation. All I would say to him is that I fully realise the immense suffering that has been caused to the majority of the population in Northern Ireland, but I might also say that I do not believe it is any use reacting with violence against violence. That way lies total disaster to everyone, and I hope my hon. Friend is not advocating that course. Reconciliation of the people into one community, living together in peace, is the only possible hope for the future.

Mr. Fitt: Would the right hon. Gentleman not agree that since he was so successful in negotiating a cease-fire his greatest opponents since that time have been the myriads of Unionist Party supporters, including the former Prime Minister, the Vanguard movement and the UDA movement, who have set out consciously and in concert to defeat him in his attempt to bring peace and reconciliation to Northern Ireland?

Would the right hon. Gentleman not further agree that at present there are at least 500 or 600 Catholic families who have been viciously intimidated out of their homes by these same extreme elements, and that this led to the confrontation yesterday afternoon? Would he accept that in his efforts to bring peace to Northern Ireland he should talk to all the interests concerned, including, as he has said in the House this afternoon, members of the Provisional IRA? He has already talked to members of the UDA, who in the final analysis may turn out to be a far more sinister and dangerous force than any other force in Northern Ireland?

Mr. Whitelaw: On the first point, no, I could not accept that these people have sought to frustrate any efforts that I had to make for peace. I think I have been long enough now in Northern Ireland to realise that, whatever efforts one makes towards peace, there are bound to be grave difficulties, doubts and fears, because fear is at the root of all the problems in the community. Whatever one does, one arouses these immense fears, and I understand all that. But I still maintain that it must be right to continue, as I was strongly advised, doggedly on in the course of reconciliation, no matter what are the disappointments.

As to intimidation, I must tell the hon. Gentleman that there has been considerable intimidation on all sides. I deeply regret this because it leads to a polarisation within the communities and to the separate communities living in separate areas. This is not for the good in the future. This intimidation is there. The root of it is, I regret to say, this very fear which lies at the root of all Northern Ireland's problems.

Mr. Sandys: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the tragic breakdown of the truce means not that his policy of reconciliation was in any way mistaken but that the fact that he has been so patient and tolerant will give him the moral strength and popular backing to adopt a policy of greater firmness if and when he considers it appropriate?

Mr. Whitelaw: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend, particularly for his suggestion that I have been patient and tolerant in a difficult situation. That is the role of anyone who seeks to solve this very difficult problem. But, however patient one is, one cannot have any mercy on those who are determined in the final event to use violence and the gun. If people are found using violence and the gun they have got to be properly dealt with, and that I will certainly do.

Mr. Orme: Would the right hon. Gentleman not agree that, however much it might appear desirable to people in the rest of the United Kingdom, it is absolutely impossible to disengage this part of the United Kingdom from the country of Ireland as such? Would he agree, therefore, that we have to find a solution to this problem? In that regard, apart from the breakdown of the truce this weekend, which I am sure everybody deplures, the other point has been the escalation this weekend of the UDA activities. Could the right hon. Gentleman say how he expects to deal with this situation? Is he having talks with the UDA? What is happening about the fresh barricades which are going up in Belfast? Is there any way of de-escalating this situation?

Mr. Whitelaw: I have previously had talks on three occasions with the UDA, and I have explained clearly to it exactly the various points of view. I very much hope that it, in company with everyone else, will see that barricades, violence and that sort of thing do not in the long run get anyone anywhere.

Mr. Biggs-Davison: Having disagreed with my right hon. Friend about his political initiatives, may I ask whether he is aware that this is no time for recrimination about the past but that it is a time for resolve to defend all sections against intimidation, to defeat the IRA by denying them their urban guerrilla bases and to end all no-go areas?

Mr. Whitelaw: I know that my hon. Friend has not agreed with some of the things that I am doing and, therefore, I am all the more grateful to him for saying that at this time there should be no recriminations.

As for the future, I am most anxious to ensure that if there are extremists on any side of the community, those extremists - or terrorists if that is what they become - are recognised as such by their respective communities and are not encouraged by them. That is a very important factor and a policy from which I shall not depart in any way. It is most important, in my judgment, that terrorists from wherever they come should be isolated from the various communities.

Mr. Harold Wilson: Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that hon. Members in all parts of the House approach this matter with a real feeling of sympathy and understanding for him? Is he aware that many hon. Members would wish at this time to reinforce what has been said from both sides of the House, that though it is a great shock and a disappointment, nevertheless it does not prove that the policy is wrong? On the contrary, we are all hoping that the right hon. Gentleman will have the courage to go on pursuing the policy that he has been pursuing so far, because this is the right policy.

Is the right hon. Gentleman further aware that in so far as he has been criticised for meeting the Provisional IRA last week, some of us do not share that criticism? Indeed, my hon. Friend and I met some of the same people four months ago, and we believe that he was right to do that in the hope that something might have come out of it.

Fourthly, will the right hon. Gentleman recognise that on the reports that I have so far read - he is much closer to the situation than the rest of the House - no blame at all can be attached to the Army or security forces for this latest grievous development?

Mr. Whitelaw: I am most grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his last remark, and I entirely agree. I am grateful also for his personal remarks towards me.

On the question of talking to the leaders of the Provisional IRA, in the very dangerous situation, as I saw it, towards the end of last week I came to the conclusion that it was my duty to seek to save lives if I could do it in any way at all, and that was, therefore, the course which I took. I am glad to be supported in it, because I shall certainly never feel like apologising for it.

Mr. Ronald Bell: While everyone must see the latest development as a tragic occurrence, may not the truth be that the so-called leaders of the Provisional IRA are not able to commit or control their supporters for more than a couple of weeks, and that, if this be so, the problem cannot be solved by any negotiations or agreement with that particular group of men?

Mr. Whitelaw: I would not wish to speculate on that. There was no question of an agreement or negotiation with that particular group of men. I thought it right personally to see them just to find out what the position was when I saw them face to face; and that is what I did.

Mr. Duffy: Could the right hon. Gentleman confirm that the 16 families who were at the heart of yesterday evening's confrontation had been properly granted tenancies? If that be so, will he say who persuaded the Army to deny them access? Was it the right hon. Gentleman himself, or was it representatives of the UDA?

Mr. Whitelaw: I understand that three of these families in particular - I shall check the exact figures - were allocated houses in that area provided that the security conditions were suitable. That is always a proviso which the housing executive has to make in these difficult areas, and that was the proviso which it did make. It was on the judgment of the security forces on the spot that it was not felt right that these families should enter at that time.

But I wish to make perfectly clear again that the whole question of the housing of these families was still a subject of discussion yesterday, and that a further meeting had been arranged for 7o' clock tonight, when the matter could be further explored. One of my officials was actually there, and he is ready to go there again tonight to discuss further with all those concerned the particular problem involved.

It was only after that that the whole agreement which had been made was totally rejected and force was then used. The opportunity of this agreement, which had been made at lunchtime yesterday, seemed to me to offer a sensible way out of a very difficult problem.

Mr. David James: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on meeting members of the IRA. I concur with the Opposition; he was quite right. In future, though, will my right hon. Friend please refer not to Catholics and Protestants but to Anglo-Saxons and Gaels since this is really a tribal dispute, not a religious dispute; and will he bear in mind that we must reach a solution ultimately in concert with Dublin?

Mr. Whitelaw: I note what my hon. Friend says about nomenclature. I am sorry if I have been wrong, but since I have been in Northern Ireland I have heard the phrase "Protestant and Catholic" so often that I have become used to it and find it difficult to use any other.

Mr. Douglas: Will the right hon. Gentleman address his mind to the fact that the British people are becoming impatient with the running out of time in Northern Ireland, as the political initiative which he is undertaking was to buy time to reach a peaceful solution to the problem, and this seems more remote than ever? Second, has he a statement to make about his own political initiatives in bringing together representatives of the political parties in Northern Ireland for a conference? Third, is he satisfied that the marching season, which is to commence this week, will produce the correct security climate - this is very important - for the troops to operate in?

Mr. Whitelaw: On the hon. Gentleman's first point, yes, I think he is right; the British people are, naturally, impatient to find some solution to this problem. But it is a regrettable fact of history that they have been impatient for a great many years and it has defied a great many people for a very long time.

As regards political solutions and discussions with the parties, I had arranged to meet, as a first step, the Ulster Unionist Council this afternoon. As I have come to the House, I had to postpone that meeting to a later date, but I shall have it as soon as possible.

On the question of the marching season, I am most anxious that the traditional marches should go forward provided that the security conditions allow. I had very much hoped that these would be all right. I still hope that the security conditions will allow them to go forward, but, naturally, I am in close contact with the security forces about that.

Mr. Gardner: Will my right hon. Friend take it that he deserves the praise of the whole House and the whole country for the courage, patience and skill with which he has attempted to carry out the Government's policies in Northern Ireland? Will he make known to the people of Ulster, if it is not already known to them, that we in this country are dismayed by the temporary - we hope, only temporary - frustration of that policy, and that we are tired and sickened at the conduct of extremists of all parties, being especially appalled by the fact that last night the leader of the Provisional IRA was able to make from Dublin, the capital of what should be, we hope, a neutral or, perhaps, a friendly country, a statement amounting to a declaration of war?

Mr. Whitelaw: My hon. and learned Friend was most kind to me in his opening remarks, but I regret to say that I deserve none of those things from the House, because I have not succeeded, and if one does not succeed one cannot deserve those kind comments.

On a second point, I should have thought that many people in Northern Ireland and many people throughout the United Kingdom would be thoroughly fed up with some of the manifestations of extremism which we have seen from all sides in Northern Ireland. I say simply this: there are many people in Northern Ireland who express passionately and devotedly their loyalty to the Queen and to the United Kingdom. I hope that at all times all of them will remember the responsibilities and duties which go with that loyalty and with that membership of the United Kingdom.

On my hon. and learned Friend's last point, I think that I shall say no more. I just note what he says.

Mr. Harold Wilson: I should not have risen again but for a new point which has been injected into the questioning in the last few moments by my hon. Friend the Member for East Stirlingshire (Mr. Douglas) and the right hon. Gentleman's reply on the question of whether the marches shall go on. Is the Secretary of State aware that some of us feel that this is not a matter which can easily be decided or on which we should make recommendations to him from either side of the House at this point, but that probably what he said represents the wisest course. However, if he, being so much closer to the situation, and to the security authorities in particular, feels it necessary to vary the view which he has just pronounced to the House, will he take it that he will have the full backing, I am sure, of this side and probably other parts of the House, too?

Mr. Whitelaw: I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman and I am equally conscious that denying the right of traditional marches can sometimes cause more trouble than allowing them. One must be careful and balanced in taking decisions on the matter. That we must be.