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STATEMENT BY AN TAOISEACH, MR. LIAM COSGRAVE, T.D.

TO DÁIL ÉIREANN ON THURSDAY, 28th OCTOBER, 1976.

"That Dáil Éireann affirms its confidence in the Taoiseach and the Government".

This motion, and the Opposition motion which it negatives, arise from the reference made by the Minister for Defence at Columb Barracks, Mullingar, on Monday, 18th October. I take it, therefore, that the House would welcome a statement of the events which have taken place since then.

The Minister's statement was made about lunchtime on Monday. Let me say now, again, what speakers on this side of the House, and the Minister, have made clear at all times. All of us regret that the phrases were used, and we particularly regret that they should have been open to the construction put on them by the President. The Minister's remarks in no way reflect the opinion of the Government.

When I heard what the Minister had said on the afternoon of Monday, 18th October, I immediately sought to contact him.

When I did so, Mr. Donegan told me that he regretted very much

what he had said and said that he intended to send the President an apology as soon as possible. He indicated that he would issue a statement to this effect to the media. This he arranged to have done. The statement, issued before 6.30 that evening, was as follows:-

"I regret the remarks which arose out of my deep feelings for the security of our citizens. I intend to offer my apologies to the President as soon as possible".

May I say that the Minister tried to have his statement available for use by the media simultaneously with the report of his remarks. He was successful in this in all cases, except one.

Later that day, when I had clarified the position, I interrupted a function I was attending to phone the President. I was, however, not able to say much as I had to speak on a public telephone. I promised to contact him again on the following day.

When I had been speaking to the Minister on Monday, I asked him to see me in my office on the following day before the Government

meeting. Mr. Donegan came to my office about 10.45 on the Tuesday and offered his resignation. I did not accept his offer. I asked him to apologise to the President, as he had promised to do, and said that I would mention his offer of resignation at the Government meeting which was due to be held shortly afterwards. This I did.

Later that day, the Minister tried to see the President but, as is generally known now, the President was not available for the meeting. I phoned the President that afternoon and informed him that the Minister was sending a letter of apology. He said he would await receipt of the letter but that he had already taken certain preliminary decisions, the nature of which he did not disclose to me. The Minister then wrote to him conveying his apologies and expressing very deep regret for the expressions he had used. The President received the letter at 5.45 p.m. and replied by a letter of the same date. His reply was received in the Minister's Department at 1.30 p.m. on Wednesday 20th October. The Minister sent me a copy of the letter, late in the afternoon of that day, and said that he

would be replying. The President, in his letter, neither accepted nor rejected the Minister's apologies and raised *many* questions about the Minister's remarks which had not been dealt with in the Minister's earlier letter of apology.

On Friday last, the Minister wrote again to the President indicating acceptance of the gravamen of his utterance as pointed out by the President. He expressed his regret for these references and again tendered his sincere and humble apology. This letter was issued ⁰ in the afternoon of Friday before the Minister or I had any knowledge of the President's intentions. That letter was received by the President late on Friday afternoon, before he had resigned from office, but was not published with the other correspondence.

At the meeting of the Government on Tuesday morning, 19th October, I mentioned the Minister's offer to resign, as I had told him I would, but did not consider that I should advise the President to accept it. This was still the position up to the time that the President resigned at 6 p.m. on Friday evening, the 22nd October. Even

then the correspondence between the Minister and the President was incomplete. The President had received the Minister's second letter but we did not know his reaction to it - whether he intended to accept the Minister's apologies or reject them or call a meeting of the Council of State for consultation, or indeed what he intended to do.

I would stress that not only was the correspondence incomplete until late on Friday but that it was a private correspondence between the President and the Minister. I kept the Government informed of its contents in so far as I knew them. As the House generally knows the President released the two earlier letters to the press about the time of his resignation. I have now arranged for copies of all the letters to be placed in the Library of this House, for the information of Deputies.

On learning of the resignation, the Government said -

"The Government have learned with deep regret of the decision of Cearbhall Ó Dálaigh to resign, and wish to record their appreciation of his services during his term of office as President".

The Minister, when he heard of the President's resignation, made a second offer to resign.

Let me say here and now, clearly and emphatically, that I have the greatest respect for the office of the President and for the man who so lately held that office. I would also wish to make it clear that neither I nor any member of the Government endorses the tone or the content of the remarks made by the Minister in Columb Barracks which led to the President's resignation.

The ultimate guarantee of Constitutional rights is the Supreme Court. The right of the President under Article 26 of the Constitution to refer a Bill to the Supreme Court for a decision as to its constitutionality is one of the means by which this guardianship can be exercised. Nothing a Government or this House does should, in any way, endanger or call in question that right. If what the Minister said on Monday week last, and what he did subsequently, were to lend colour to any suspicion that these fundamental principles were not accepted,

without reservation, then there would be no doubt whatsoever as to my course of action.

But look at the facts. The Minister had made a statement which he has regretted and for which he has unreservedly apologised. He, in no way, reflects Government opinion in what he said. And he has done his best to retract any wrongful reflection on the office of the Presidency which might have been implied in his remarks.

These remarks, however inexcusable in tone, sprang from the Minister's own passionately held convictions as to the priorities in the contention with those who use violence to advance political ends.

And let us not, sitting in the security of this House, forget just how deeply held those convictions are on the Minister's part. He lives near the border where atrocious murders have been committed. His own premises have been the subject of bombing attacks. I do not say that it is because of these events that the Minister holds his views so strongly - they

are too much part of his nature for that - but the fact that these things happened can only have strengthened his convictions and given them an emotional depth and strength which many, who have not suffered as he has, may well lack. We should remember this before criticising the man.

I would like you, in particular, to look at this question of motivation. The Minister believes strongly in the institutions of this State, the necessity for upholding the rule of law and for getting rid of subversion and violence as a political weapon. He used words he should not have used; he acted in a way no one would seek to defend. But what he was doing he did out of a passionate belief in convictions which the vast majority in this House share. He apologised for what was wrong in his actions and has regretted unreservedly any hurt he may have caused to the person of the President for whom we all have the greatest regard. Indeed I would like now take this opportunity of expressing again to him my appreciation and that of the Government of his services as President.

I think that to pursue the question of the Minister's resignation in the circumstances I have outlined could confer benefits neither on the Government nor on the Irish people. What the Minister did, his reasons for doing it and the subsequent course of events certainly do not warrant any loss of confidence in me or in the ~~present~~ Government. I ask the House to support this view.