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Stormont Castle, Belfast

28 October 1976

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the Rt Hon Roy Mason, MP, said in the Commons today that no system of government within Northern Ireland would be stable or effective unless both parts of the community acquiesced in that system and were willing to work to support it.

Mr Mason was replying to a question from Mr Cyril D Townsend, MP, (Bexley, Bexleyheath), who had asked if he would either take an independent political initiative in Northern Ireland or step up the level of activity of the Security Forces.

The Secretary of State replied:-

"No Sir. There is no change in our position.

Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom unless a majority of the population want this changed.

The Government wants a devolved government, but, as we have consistently made clear, no system of government within Northern Ireland will be stable or effective unless both parts of the community acquiesce in that system and are willing to work to support it. This means a system which will command widespread support throughout the community and in which both the majority and the minority will participate.

Until there is a devolved government in Northern Ireland the Government is responsible for ensuring that Northern Ireland is governed. It will not shirk this responsibility. But the representatives of the Northern Ireland people must find agreement. This cannot be imposed. They must find a will to work together."

The Secretary of State and Minister of State Mr Don Concannon, MP, dealt with a series of questions relating to the security situation, violent crime and prisons.

Mr Ian Gow, MP (Eastbourne), and Mr Philip Goodhart, MP (Bromley, Beckenham), asked Mr Mason if he would make a statement about the security situation.

The Secretary of State replied:-

"Attacks by the Provisional IRA upon the Security Forces have led to the deaths during the past three months of 3 policemen and 4 soldiers. Twenty-four persons have been killed by sectarian gangsters from both communities.

So far this year 1,037 persons have been charged with terrorist crimes, including 88 charged with murder and 89 with attempted murder. A growing number are being caught redhanded. The greater efficiency of the security forces and the people's revulsion from violence is closing the net on terrorists. They know they cannot win. The Police and the Army perform their difficult and onerous duties with skill, bravery, tact and compassion that could not be equalled by forces anywhere else in the world. I know that they have the full-hearted support of this House."

Mr Peter Hardy, MP (Rother Valley), asked the Secretary of State how many persons had been convicted of crimes of violence in Northern Ireland to date in the current year.

Mr Concannon replied:-

"During the period 1 January to 30 September 1976, 639 persons were convicted on indictment of offences specified in Part One of Schedule 4 of the Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) Act 1973 as amended. The majority of such offences involved or were associated with violence."

Mr James Lamond, MP (Oldham East), asked the Secretary of State the number of prisoners in Northern Ireland prisons; and the range and average of sentence.

Mr Concannon answered:-

"The total number of prisoners on 24 October 1976 was 2,667. This included 1,867 sentenced prisoners of whom 1,163 were special category, 660 untried prisoners and 140 Borstal trainees. The sentences being served ranged from 2 weeks to life imprisonment.

The average for those serving determinate sentences at 3 October, the latest date for which the figure is available, is 6.38 years."

Mr Ian Sproat, MP (Aberdeen South), asked the Secretary of State if he would take steps to end the payment of social security funds to support IRA terrorists, temporarily released over Christmas and other holidays.

Mr Concannon replied:-

"Prisoners on parole from prisons in Northern Ireland are not entitled to social security payments."

Mr Stan Thorne, MP (Preston South), asked the Secretary of State what was his policy in respect of special interrogation centres in Northern Ireland.

Mr Mason said:-

"There are no special interrogation centres in Northern Ireland."

Mr John Carson, MP (Belfast North), asked the Secretary of State what was the outcome of the enquiry into the alleged delay of the Police answering the numerous calls to the hon Member for West Belfast's house on August 9, 1976.

Mr Mason replied:-

"Neither my predecessor nor I considered that there was any need for a formal enquiry. I am satisfied that the Police and the Army reacted promptly and did everything they could to protect the household of the hon Member for West Belfast."