



Northern Ireland Office

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SPEECH BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND, MR ROY MASON.
ON TUESDAY 13 SEPTEMBER 1977 AT 1 PM AT PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS,
STORMONT

I have just completed my first year as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. It has been a year of great challenge and some tragedy; indeed it has been a year laced with moments of elation at great achievement and other occasions of sadness and depression.

There have been challenges on the security and economic fronts, but above all it has been a year in which the people of Northern Ireland have faced the most serious challenge of all: the challenge to their personal freedom, their right to work and to go about their daily business peaceably.

On two occasions world attention has been focused on this small country, once when the UUAC tried to bring the economic life of the province to a halt and again most recently when the Provisional IRA threatened to cause widespread disruption during the visit of HM The Queen.

On each occasion the gauntlet was thrown down publicly and the world watched to see how the people of this community would react. These challenges were met with courage and resilience and showed more clearly than anything else could, that people here are prepared to commit themselves with faith and confidence to the future of Northern Ireland. I believe therefore that this has been a year of real progress in establishing the prospect of a peaceful and viable future for this community. There are encouraging signs that this change and progress is perceived not only within the United Kingdom but most importantly in countries which can make a positive contribution towards the economic stability of Northern Ireland.

Such progress requires constant oversight and attention to detail and my weekly attendance at Cabinet meetings and my continuing interest in Parliamentary business is symbolic of the clear responsibility which Her Majesty's Government has for every citizen here. I believe that this commitment has been demonstrated and proved beyond all doubt during this year. The myth of British withdrawal is dead forever.

In no other single Whitehall office does the manner of expression and the making of decisions mean so much as they do in this job. One is always aware - cautiously and even frighteningly aware - of the effects of the spoken word and the consequences of one's actions.

Without being dramatic I am frequently aware that a sentence or a paragraph which is intended to express perhaps a widespread public feeling of gratitude to the Security Forces for the successes they have achieved in the protection of this society may carry the spark which inflames some warped mind to decide on an act of violence. Every time I go into a Whitehall battle to achieve some new decision of benefit to Northern Ireland I am acutely aware that it is the livelihood of many people for which I am fighting.

I am aware also that I am in a cauldron of serious political, industrial and even security difficulties - a unique "Irish Stew". In no other region of the United Kingdom is there such a mixture of political, religious, industrial and terrorist problems, all of which must be vigorously tackled, solutions found and hope created and sustained in the Province.

It is quite remarkable and a great tribute to the people of Northern Ireland that in spite of these past troubled years in which deaths, bombings and terrorist scares have been a constant factor of daily life, years of disturbingly high unemployment rates, of disappointments among political leaders and parties, the fabric of society has held together so well.

It says volumes for the fibre of the people of Northern Ireland that they have suffered so much yet still face the future with courage and determination. How many other countries could have taken so much without having its basic and fundamental freedoms shattered and its democratic institutions torn asunder.

I recognise this resilience and fortitude and it has been one of the great strengths and encouragements offered to me in getting on with the job.

When I came here I was no stranger to Northern Ireland. I have been visiting here since 1962 and my Ministerial interests have covered industry, tourism and defence requirements. Nevertheless, I did not consider myself an expert and my immediate strategy was:

- (1) to lower the temperature and to be seen to have no involvement in political squabbles. Nor was I prepared to govern by instant statement either to politicians or terrorists - or indeed, as you know, to the Press;
- (2) to convey my genuine concern and determination to overcome the unemployment and industrial difficulties which have faced the Province for so long;
- (3) to step up action, within the law, against the terrorists and gangsters who have without scruple wrecked and plundered the ordinary people of the Province;
- (4) and hopefully to try to bring together the political parties so that they would together create their own devolved government based on partnership and understanding of each other's traditions, culture and ideals.

None of these problems in my view could be dealt with in isolation. They are inevitably interlinked and although security was and still is a matter of primary concern, I was determined to concentrate much of my time and effort in improving the economic, industrial and social climate. I have also pushed forward with wide-ranging improvements in the fields of education, health and the social services.

I have been fortunate to have a really good Ministerial team, totally committed as they are to the Province. Their community involvement has been quite significant. There are very few, if any, parts of Northern Ireland which have not been visited by Ministers who meet local elected leaders and the ordinary man in the street. We have shown that Direct Rule is not Remote Rule.

As a measure of the intensity of my own deep involvement in Northern Ireland I have made 157 aircraft flights to and from Northern Ireland and an additional 148 helicopter flights within the Province - a total of 305 air journeys of varying lengths in one year.

My wife has made 40 flights and has carried out more than 50 engagements and my Parliamentary Private Secretary has come here many times and has concentrated on meeting people and particularly talking to school-children.

I think we have shown our complete and total involvement in the affairs of the Province.

And we have seen the fruits of our labours. The year has seen many breakthroughs in the economic and industrial field. I was extremely pleased to have the opportunity yesterday of addressing the first meeting of the newly reconstituted Economic Council and I am certain it will play a constructive and valuable role by virtue of its local expertise and experience.

The announcement, within the past few days, of the placing of another order with the shipyard of Harland & Wolff for a British Rail Ferry, when added to the very important L.P.G. order of some months ago, has been enormously important for the future of the Yard and its workforce. Those orders are worth no less than £82 million.

I am not going to be falsely modest about this. The £100 million which has enabled the Northern Ireland Electricity Service to cut tariffs to industrial and commercial users by no less than 30%; the retention of the Selective Employment Premium for Northern Ireland saving 10,000 jobs when it was removed in the rest of the United Kingdom; the go-ahead for the new Kilroot Power Station; our job creation and counter-unemployment schemes; and the other substantial economic and industrial achievements did not materialise by sitting at our desks and waiting for them to come to us. It necessitated hard work and fighting in Cabinet.

I believe the people of Northern Ireland now see and appreciate the way in which these problems are being tackled in Northern Ireland.

Direct Rule is positive, is compassionate and it cares. It is positive in that we are doing everything possible to improve the standard of life here; it is compassionate in that it takes account of the wishes of the people here and does everything possible to meet them; and it cares in that it is making every effort to get Northern Ireland back to normality.

Resources are being re-directed - we are tackling the renovation and rehabilitation of the major cities of Belfast and Londonderry - we are taking major steps in housing policy and we are planning to tackle the areas of social need.

In April this year I established the Belfast Areas of Need Planning Team under Lord Melchett to tackle these. Significant action has been taken and more will follow.

The £2 million additional funds which I announced then have now been allocated for the construction of a wide range of social, community, youth and recreational projects to be completed within the next two years.

While I would not wish to underestimate the scale of the problem ahead, the first six months have shown the Government's determination to take positive action and over £6 million has been re-directed towards Inner Belfast.

The problems - especially of unemployment - remain formidable but the incentives I can offer for areas - the Lower Falls, Lower Shankill, etc - are now the highest ever in Northern Ireland and competitive with those offered anywhere else in Western Europe.

I believe we have made great progress also in the security field. You will have noted, because it is your job to do so, that the level of violence in the Province has reduced very considerably indeed.

Life in Northern Ireland is, I am sorry to say, inevitably associated with the violence which brings the activities of the terrorists to the attention of the media. This violence has created the image of a Province in which normality is a daily routine of bombings and shootings.

Undoubtedly, while violence continues this image will persist, but it is important to note that the quality of life in Northern Ireland is steadily improving as the Security Forces continue to bear heavily on the terrorists.

In the four months prior to my appointment as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland there were some 386 bomb attacks and 731 shooting attacks; in the past four months - which included the Royal Visit and the celebration of two emotive anniversaries - the comparable figures are 122 bomb attacks and 447 shooting attacks.

Similarly there has been a significant reduction in the number of deaths and injuries - in that four-month period last year 111 people lost their lives and 1,024 were injured, as compared with 39 killed and 493 injured in the same period this year.

There has at the same time been a corresponding increase in the Security Forces' success in detecting and charging those responsible for terrorist violence - the comparative figures for the same four-month period are 383 persons charged last year and 553 persons charged this year.

Nevertheless, my intensification of security measures which I announced some time ago is proceeding and is already beginning to pay off. As the new techniques and measures become more widely used we will improve still further.

There can be no "acceptable level of violence". I am not complacent and I am determined to sustain the pressure of the law on the criminals.

In this context particularly no praise can be too high for the RUC, the Army and the UDR. The way in which the Security Forces are improving their co-ordination, organisation and methods is leading to increasing success in bringing before the Courts those responsible for violent crime in the community. The creation of new Regional Crime Squads of the RUC, Divisional Mobile Support Units, the improvement in police equipment and forensic techniques, and the significant advances in the ways in which evidence and intelligence of all kinds are used to detect and convict the criminal are turning the tide against those who seek to set aside, if not destroy, the rule of law

in Northern Ireland.

I know that the Provisional IRA do not like to hear these words spoken. Their response is to say "We'll show him". Well, my task is to provide for the people of Northern Ireland as much protection as I possibly can against the gunman, the bomber, the arsonist and those shadowy figures who live fat on the proceeds of crimes.

It is, sadly, all too clear that many of these crimes are committed by the young and easily led. They eventually are sent to serve long sentences of imprisonment - and remember that they have no prospect of an amnesty - or indeed they die in the commission of their acts of violence and are soon forgotten by those who recruited them.

And many parents suffer the pain of knowing that their sons or daughters lose the best part of their lives in prison because they have fallen under the influence of evil men.

The evil men of the Provisional IRA are the main enemy of our community but there are thugs and gangsters in paramilitary organisations on both sides of the community. Their activities, killing, wounding and bombing attacks on essential services, small businesses and the community as a whole are the acts of people who may once have claimed an ideal but have now reduced it to despicable levels.

They no longer have a cause. The people have shunned them and have clearly shown that they are sickened by their slaughter. I am not saying that all of the people of Northern Ireland now welcome and assist the security forces. But there is no doubt that the men of violence have been cast aside so far as popular support is concerned.

As I said earlier, I am not being euphoric. But the recognisable fact that the paramilitaries are regarded as the greater evil is a heartening sign and the fact that people now co-operate with the security forces gives grounds for hope. I put it no farther than that. But my task of creating a stable and law-abiding society must go on if Northern Ireland is to have a future and I am determined both that it shall go on and that Northern Ireland shall have a future worthy of the courage and perseverance of the people who live here.

Now while the security situation has improved, I must say I am disappointed at the lack of political progress.

Let me re-state two major principles which guide our action:

First, Northern Ireland is a part of the United Kingdom and will not cease to be so without the consent of the majority of the people of Northern Ireland.

Second, that we wish to achieve a system of devolved government in the Province which the majority of all parts of the community can support and sustain.

As you know, immediately after the District Council Elections I saw the leaders of the four major political parties. I told them that a fully devolved legislative government in Northern Ireland remained the Government's goal, but that we had no indication that the parties were yet ready to agree on the form this should take.

The Official Unionists, SDLP and Alliance parties accepted my invitation to join with my officials in exploring the desirability of some form of administration short of full devolution. This was an interim measure or a useful next step and one which was worthy of some discussion.

The Government made no secret pacts with anyone. I will say specifically that HMG has not made any pact, or secret deal, with Unionists in Westminster. I say that quite deliberately and quite honestly. Nor did we seek some clever cosmetic arrangement.

Indeed, in an entirely positive sense we tried to explore with the parties whether it was possible to devise an interim arrangement which would involve the devolution of real power and responsibility and lead to progress towards a stable and durable solution which would gain the necessary support from both sides of the community.

There was every opportunity in the talks to cover the ground fully.

There is agreement among the parties that full legislative devolution should remain the objective. But - sadly - I have found that the old differences on the form of devolution still arise,