



NORTHERN IRELAND Information Service

14 February 1989

The following is the text of the speech by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Rt Hon Tom King MP, at East Belfast Rotary Club, on Tuesday, February 14.

All sane people are appalled at recent vicious sectarian murders. Only the sickest of minds can still pretend there is any purpose whatsoever in the continuation of killings and terrorism in Northern Ireland.

Disgust at the murder of Mr Finucanè, disgust at other sectarian murders in recent weeks shows how widely in both communities we share the revulsion at attacks, whether they be on solicitors, on contractors, on postmen and milkmen, on the families of the security forces, or on the security forces themselves who seek to defend both communities from the evil terrorists of both extremes.

All too often in Northern Ireland emphasis is placed on the divisions, the different views that seem so irreconcilable. And yet how often on important issues elected leaders across the communities can share the same concerns and attitudes. Whether it is the common revulsion at violence and sectarian killings, or the shared concern at such a critical economic issue as Harland and Wolff, or some other major issue, I have seen how the leaders of the principal parties can rise above party rivalries and conflict and make common cause for the people they represent.

On these occasions I can see so clearly how much better the interests of all the people of Northern Ireland could be served.

I say that against the background of the Government seeking to do its best for the Province under direct rule.

We seek to govern Northern Ireland fairly and in the best interests of all its people. We can take pride in much of the progress that has been made, in jobs, in housing, in health care, in the things that matter to ordinary people.

In jobs there have been successes in providing new employment, for example, the welcome new investments both by Northern Ireland companies and by overseas companies like Montupet and Daewoo, and

now the Department of Social Security proposals to run many of their London offices from Belfast, all developments which build confidence and demonstrate that Northern Ireland can build new industries and new opportunities for jobs.

- Making Belfast Work is an initiative of very great promise: we are determined to tackle the problems of the most disadvantaged areas of Belfast. We have to work in partnership with the private and voluntary sectors: and committed and resourceful voluntary effort is another of Northern Ireland's great strengths.

- In health, there has been a very substantial increase in the level of service. Applying the philosophy of the recently-published White paper, we shall, I believe, bring the Health Service in Northern Ireland into even higher regard.

- The education reforms are another example of building constructively on what is best in the system. We aim at a system of breadth and excellence. We shall improve accountability, and assist development of integrated education where parents wish it.

- On fair employment the new Bill, and other reforms like the setting up of the community relations unit, signal our determination that disadvantage in any sphere of life on religious grounds should be a matter of history; and that Government should take a lead in helping the community to live together.

So we can point to many real successes of direct rule, not to mention the rate at which improvements in areas such as housing have been achieved. Yet the more I see of direct rule, the more I recognise the need for a better approach in which locally elected people, with their own special knowledge of their areas, can make a much more effective contribution to the administration of Northern Ireland. I believe that the North would benefit from that and I sense that the vast majority of people here do too, and desperately want to see it starting to happen.

I was very struck by the approach of the different party leaders and their colleagues at our recent meeting about Harland and Wolff. It is an important problem, and they approached it, not in any way seeking to score political points, but to discuss with Government in a serious and responsible way what possible solutions there might be. Of course Harland and Wolff is an important problem, but it is not the only issue of crucial importance to the people of Northern Ireland. With unemployment still far too high, just as central is the whole question of the encouragement of investment from the mainland and overseas, and how we can ensure that Northern Ireland gets a good share of the likely dispersal of jobs from the South East. Are not the Health Service reforms and their impact on the Province a major interest for everybody here? Are the Lord Chancellor's radical reforms to be left to a closed debate among lawyers, or are local elected representatives going to argue the case of their constituents, the customers of the legal services? Even more topically, who is best placed to present the case for Northern Ireland's food producers as the Government grapples with the recent anxieties about the possible health hazards in some foods?

All of these subjects are areas where there can only be benefit in constitutional elected representatives, either together or separately, being prepared to sit down and present and argue their case with Government. And there will be other major issues that arise which ought to be addressed in a similar way.

For some of these issues Westminster may provide the best forum for debate and discussion. For others more local means may be better.

What I want to see is the development of ways in which we can work together for the good of Northern Ireland, and I want to know how people feel we should proceed. We know that it makes sense to talk together, we know we can do it when the issues are important enough, and we need to see if we can identify the most sensible route to take.

I believe that we can make progress on the wider political issues as well. The crucial factor is the will to make progress - the will of the people of Northern Ireland and their politicians. I want to see progress made and I would not want to rule out discussing any option which had some chance of working.

There is no lack of suggestions or ideas about ways in which Northern Ireland's own elected representatives could be more directly involved in the business of government here.

In January last year the leaders of the Unionist parties gave me their own outline proposals for the future government of Northern Ireland. Both the Prime Minister and I described those Unionist proposals as constructive and encouraging. The Unionist leaders told me that their proposals were confidential and they saw them as a basis for discussion and perhaps ultimately for negotiation with the SDLP. While I have respected that confidence, I hope we can now build on this constructive approach.

In my talks with them over the past year, the other constitutional political parties, including the SDLP and the Alliance Party, have talked to me about devolution and their willingness to enter into joint talks: and the Alliance Party have published their own proposals.

The SDLP, as the constitutional representatives of the nationalist tradition, have been less specific than some about the form of future government within Northern Ireland that they seek. However their leaders have regularly said that they are willing genuinely to enter into discussions and I welcome that.

Progress can only come if the parties are prepared to discuss the possibilities flexibly and with a degree of determination to reach

agreement. I recognise that it takes courage to look for areas of agreement. And it takes leadership. There have been hopeful signs recently that such courage and leadership may now exist.

We also know that many people who do not themselves hold political office, but do care deeply about the future of the Province, are seeking to bring about improved relations between the two communities and to remove barriers, for example in the arts, in sport, and particularly perhaps in our schools. These people hope that their efforts to build trust between the communities will be reinforced at the political level. They seek political leadership which is responsive and responsible. There is that leadership in some of our district councils. There is certainly talk and debate between unionists and nationalists outside Northern Ireland, at Westminster and sometimes elsewhere. Here again may be something on which, in time, we can build.

The question now is whether the constitutional political parties and those who support them wish to make further progress. If they do, then I want to ensure that the Government is ready to play its part in whatever way is appropriate and helpful. To do that, we must be sure we understand their positions. I shall therefore be seeking to explore with all those parties and groups what possibilities there may be for progress. I am asking Dr Brian Mawhinney to help me in this task so that between us we can have the chance to have the widest possible coverage of views in Northern Ireland.

What I ask for now is not an immediate response. Too often in Northern Ireland the pressure of the media for instant comment has destroyed the chance of serious discussion. I hope that people will take the time to read and reflect on what I have said, and see if they can respond in a constructive way. Moreover, if they are not clear about these suggestions, I hope they will let us know.

But while I do not seek an immediate response, I hope that everybody who should respond will do so. Anybody can refuse, but that would

be a great pity. It won't hurt me, as the Government will clearly carry on discharging its duty to the best of its ability, as it has done in recent years. What such a refusal would do would be to damage the Province, and deny the people the constructive leadership they deserve.

Understanding and dialogue are not going to be achieved overnight. But after the first steps to a dialogue over the past year, I hope that we can take some rather longer strides in the months ahead. All who care about a more peaceful and happier future for Northern Ireland will want to see that further progress made.