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Owen Paterson - Oral Statement on the Murder of Police Constable Ronan Kerr

MONDAY 4 APRIL 2011

4 April 2011

Murder of Police Constable Ronan Kerr



The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr Owen Paterson): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the murder of Police Constable Ronan Kerr in Omagh on Saturday afternoon. Shortly before 4 pm, a device exploded, destroying his car in Highfield close, a quiet residential neighbourhood in the town: 25-year-old Constable Kerr died as a result of his injuries. I am sure that the whole House will join me in sending our deepest sympathies and heartfelt condolences to the family, friends and colleagues of this brave young officer. He was a local man who, having gained a university degree, decided upon a career in the Police Service of Northern Ireland. He dedicated his life to the service of the whole community; the terrorists who murdered him want to destroy that community. The contrast could not be clearer.

These terrorists continue to target police officers and endanger the lives of the public. We all pay tribute to the PSNI and the Garda for their remarkable commitment and for their success in thwarting a number of recent attacks. Working seamlessly together, last year they charged 80 people with terrorist offences, compared with 17 in 2009. However, regrettably, on Saturday a device exploded, killing Constable Kerr. His murder was a revolting and cowardly act perpetrated by individuals intent on defying the wishes of the people.

Following Saturday's attack, the PSNI immediately began a painstaking murder inquiry.

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MONDAY 4 APRIL 2011

PATERSON CONDEMNS MURDER OF PSNI OFFICER

SATURDAY 2 APRIL 2011

The House will understand that that meticulous work is still in the early stages. I saw the Chief Constable yesterday and I know that the PSNI, working closely with the Garda Siochana, will not rest until these evil people are brought to justice. I reiterate in the strongest terms the Chief Constable's appeal for anyone with any information to bring it to the police.

The PSNI has support from right across the community and is responsible to locally elected politicians. Just over a year ago, we strongly supported the previous Government's determination to devolve policing and justice, and we backed the very significant financial package that accompanied that devolution. After the election we endorsed proposals for a further £50 million for the PSNI, specifically to confront the terrorist threat. In the national security strategy, published last October, we made countering terrorist groups a tier 1 priority. We have agreed an exceptional £200 million of additional funding over four years, as requested by the Chief Constable, so that he can plan ahead with certainty.

As the Prime Minister said on Saturday, "the British Government stands fully behind the Chief Constable and his officers as they work to protect Northern Ireland from terrorism".

That cannot be done by a security response alone, crucial though that is. It can be resolved in the long term only by the community itself, together with strong leadership by local politicians. That leadership was evident again this morning when the First and Deputy First Ministers and the Justice Minister stood as one with the Chief Constable to reiterate their determination that these terrorists will never succeed. They all called for the active support of the PSNI. They spoke for the people of Northern Ireland, and their condemnation of this grotesque murder has been echoed in London, Dublin and Washington.

Our clear and united message to these terrorists is that they will not destabilise the power-sharing institutions at Stormont, they will not deter young Catholic men and women from joining the police service, and they will not drag Northern Ireland back to the past.

Thirteen years ago, the agreement was endorsed by overwhelming majorities in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. That was the true democratic voice of the people of Ireland, north and south. They, above all, will ensure that the terrorists fail. The visit of Her Majesty the Queen will shortly reinforce the fact that relations within these islands have never been stronger.

Today, politics in Northern Ireland is stable. The democratic process is established. An Assembly has completed its first full term in decades. At the elections in May, voters will choose their politicians to serve in the new Assembly based on everyday bread-and-butter issues. That is democracy in action.

Those who murdered police Constable Ronan Kerr fear democracy. The Omagh bomb in 1998 did not destroy the peace process. The terrorists failed then and they will fail now. They will not deflect us from our shared determination to build a peaceful, stable and prosperous Northern Ireland for everyone.

In the powerful and moving words of Constable Kerr's mother yesterday:

"We were so proud of Ronan and all that he stood for. Don't let his death be in vain."

Mr Shaun Woodward (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. The House can only echo and underline the sincerity and unity with which the leaders of all Northern Ireland's political parties-nationalist, republican and Unionist-have spoken. The Opposition are part of that single voice, which reverberated around the world this weekend.

We remember Constable Ronan Kerr with profound respect. Our hearts go out to his mother and family, and to the people of Omagh, for whom the brutal assassination reopens a deep wound. We think, too, of the police family of Northern Ireland, who today deeply mourn their colleague, but will be at work, the gravest risks to each no less, serving the community selflessly.

The men and women of the PSNI do not see themselves as extraordinary, but in what we ask of them, in the gravest risks that they daily face, we know them as extraordinary. In his courage and service, Ronan Kerr exemplified that spirit. His commitment to working for one community-Protestant and Catholic-stands in absolute juxtaposition to the deluded and demonic deeds of those who targeted him.

However futile their actions, those behind the psychotic acts of violence seek to bring fear and terror back to the streets of Northern Ireland. Constable Kerr was not an isolated target, nor was the attack random. His death is profoundly shocking, but an attack on a police officer is not a surprise.

When the Belfast agreement was signed, as the head of MI5 acknowledged last year, we all hoped that the residual threat from terrorism in Northern Ireland would remain low and gradually decline. Regrettably, optimism must give way to realism. The threat is not low: today it is severe. It is more serious today than in nearly 15 years and it is ongoing. A serious terrorist incident was attempted almost every week last year-a dramatic and regrettable escalation on previous years. Those people have improved capacity, increasingly sophisticated technical and engineering capability, and they aspire to extend their reach.

Today's terrorists may have little or no community support, but we make a grave mistake if we do not recognise that, in addition to those who refused to accept the peace agenda, a new generation is growing up, delusionally embracing a new wave of criminal and deadly violence. Their numbers grow significantly. Bordering on psychotic, their ambition is to instil fear through attempted bombings and murders. Their aspirations extend beyond Northern Ireland to Britain.

Excepting national security, responsibility today for policing and justice is devolved to Stormont. However, devolution does not absolve us at Westminster of our broader responsibilities to the people of Northern Ireland. The Secretary of State recently succeeded in persuading the Treasury to provide additional resources from the reserve. He is to be congratulated on that. That, of course, was before this attack.

If the Chief Constable should require-to fulfil the ongoing demands of community policing for the public and, of course, for the safety of his officers-further additional resources for overtime, forensics, vehicles and other items to meet the threat, will the Secretary of State reassure the House that they will be agreed and made available without delay?

To tackle today's threat, we must ensure that we not only contain the existing terrorists, but do all we can to stop alienated young people being drawn into that pattern of crime. The Secretary of State will know of the work of Co-operation Ireland, which is urgently seeking additional financial support for its critical work from, among others, the British Government. He knows the former deputy Chief Constable, Peter Sheridan, who leads that work. The organisation has made cutting-edge proposals, tackling the sectarian legacy but also dealing with real problems in the present. Will the Secretary of State consider the proposals sympathetically and renew his support for additional funding with the Chancellor?

The Home Secretary raised the threat level in Great Britain last September. To ensure that we are guided not by optimism, but by realism, will the Secretary of State reassure the House that the Government will learn from not only the mistakes that we made in the past, but the security measures that we got right?

Will the Secretary of State confirm that he is satisfied from discussions with the Home Secretary that here in Britain police forces have and will continue to have the resources they need to address the threat appropriately? Will he also confirm that, at all levels of Government, there is no complacency? Prevention should be our guide.

On national security, and if we are to learn, as the head of MI5 said, from "the pattern of history", will the Secretary of State tell the House that he is fully satisfied with the co-operation between the PSNI and forces here in Britain, including on timely and comprehensive sharing of information?

Without capability, the threat from terrorists will be significantly contained. Those who supply the criminals must also be brought to justice. Will the Secretary of State confirm that anyone involved today or in the past in the supply of weapons or explosives will not be given immunity from prosecution? Will he confirm that, should the PSNI wish to conduct interviews with any foreign nationals currently in Britain, the Government would immediately help facilitate that?

Hon. Members will have seen the statement that Constable Kerr's mother made on television last night. Yesterday was mothering Sunday. When so many sons and daughters remembered what their mothers had given for them, Constable Kerr's mother, in her darkest hours of grief, shared with our country what her precious son meant to her and her family. We all have a duty to ensure that Ronan's death will not be in vain. Let us be judged on what we now do.

Mr Paterson: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments and support, which send a strong signal across the world that the House is united on the issue.

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned contingency. We have made it clear that, as under the arrangements that he fixed with the Executive at the time, should the threat increase, we are prepared to consider the reserve, but let us look at what we have done. We confirmed £50 million last year and got an exceptional £200-million programme agreed this year for the next four years. Today, the Chief Constable said: "We have the resources, we have the resilience and we have the commitment."

As I said in the statement, we are supportive of work with community groups, and I spoke to the chairman of Co-operation Ireland this morning. We will consider a range of alternatives because, as I made clear, there is not just a security solution.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has made counter-terrorism a priority, and budgets are protected. I am absolutely confident that there is increasing and improved co-ordination between the PSNI and GB-based forces. She came to Belfast to discuss that with the Chief Constable a few months ago.

Finally, I assure the right hon. Gentleman that no immunity has been given to anyone. If he were present for the statement from my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, he would have heard him say quite clearly that Musa Kusa is not being offered any immunity from British or international justice. He also said during his statement that we believe in the rule of law.

Several hon. Members rose -

Mr Speaker: Order. This is a matter of the utmost gravity, which is being treated as such by the Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State. However, I hope the House will understand when I remind Members of the very heavy pressures upon time, the further Government statement to follow and an Opposition day debate. Therefore, brevity from Back Bench and Front alike from now on is vital, and it will be enforced if necessary from the Chair. It is no good Members saying, "Ah, but the point I had to make was important." They are all important, but we must make progress, and I cannot guarantee accommodating everybody.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): May I thank the Secretary of State for the advance copy of his statement, and on behalf of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee join him in condemning this evil and cowardly murder? I do not believe that those people have any legitimate political aims, but, if they do, is it not worth drawing a parallel and reminding them that a murderous campaign by the IRA made any change in the jurisdiction and constitutional position of Northern Ireland less, rather than more, likely?

Mr Paterson: I am grateful to the Chairman of the Select Committee for his comments and for the Committee's support on this issue. We are quite clear that there are now mechanisms for everyone in Northern Ireland to pursue their legitimate political ambitions by peaceful, democratic means. There is absolutely no excuse, and no place for violence that is in theory for a political cause.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): Our sympathies and prayers are with the Kerr family at this terrible time. I spoke to Mrs Kerr yesterday in her family home. Her courage and bravery, and that of her son Ronan, stand in stark contrast to the cowardly callousness of those who murdered him. At this time, does the Secretary of State agree that the best answer, as I said at Prime Minister's questions only last Wednesday, is for the people of Northern Ireland to stand together, as they are standing together, as one community, to reject these men of violence, and to keep Northern Ireland moving forward? That is the clear, united voice coming from Northern Ireland and this House today, and Ronan's death will not be in vain.

Mr Paterson: I wholeheartedly concur with the right hon. Gentleman's comments. For Mrs Kerr, yesterday afternoon, under those circumstances, on mothers day, to welcome politicians to her house and to come out after that to make the statement that she made, was a quite remarkable moment. We all owe it to her to do exactly as the right hon. Gentleman says-to rally round together. I encourage everyone to participate, campaign and vote in the coming elections in Northern Ireland, to show that that is the way for Northern Ireland to progress.

Kris Hopkins (Keighley) (Con): May I offer my condolences to the family, friends and colleagues of Constable Ronan Kerr? Will the Secretary of State join me in continuing to support, honour and celebrate the brave men and women of the PSNI, which can today proudly and rightly say that it is drawn from all communities in Northern Ireland?

Mr Paterson: I am happy to confirm to my hon. Friend that we now have a police service that is well manned with personnel from right across the community, with strong local support, and one that is endorsed by all the main political parties. That is a major force for good.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. As the only leader of a Northern Ireland party who is a Member of this House, I wish to add the voice of the Social Democratic and Labour party to those who have condemned this murder, and who are determined that its perpetrators are brought to justice. I was happy yesterday to speak to Mrs Nuala Kerr, and to her two sons and daughter, to convey those sympathies on behalf of the wider community and my party.

Such killing was always wrong. It was wrong even when there was some political support for such violence. While we grieve for Constable Kerr and remember Constable Carroll, let us include in our prayers all those who have died throughout Northern Ireland.

Given the level of infiltration of the dissident groups by the security services, will the Secretary of State give a firm assurance that the PSNI will receive every scrap of information and intelligence that is held by the security services that could be relevant to its investigation of this appalling murder of Constable Ronan Kerr? May I join other hon. Members in urging all members of the wider community in Northern Ireland who have information to pass it on to the PSNI in order to assist with the inquiry?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. We must have much shorter questions, although I understand their importance.

Mr Paterson: I wholeheartedly concur with the hon. Lady's comments. Her party has a proud record of pursuing its political ambitions by democratic means through the most difficult times. She asked about the security services. I shall repeat the comments of Lord Carlile, who is an independent assessor of these matters:

"MI5 and the PSNI are working very closely together and one really could not have more work being done and more energetically to try and deal with what is a very difficult threat".

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Will the Secretary of State join me in commending Nuala Kerr for the conspicuous and formidable moral leadership she has shown since the callous and senseless murder of her son, and in urging all politicians to demonstrate the same conspicuous and formidable moral leadership in dealing with the terrorists who murdered her son?

Mr Paterson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that strong comment. I entirely concur with what he said about Mrs Kerr, and I remind everyone of what she said yesterday.

"We all need to stand up and be counted and to strive for equality...We don't want to go back into the dark days again of fear and terror."

Naomi Long (Belfast East) (Alliance): May I add my sincere sympathies to those expressed by the Secretary of State to the family, colleagues and friends of Constable Ronan Kerr. I also add to the Secretary of State's call to those who have information that could lead to those who perpetrated the attack being brought to justice. Their destructive and murderous attack is in stark contrast to the constructive role that the PSNI plays in our community in trying to build for the future.

Does the Secretary of State agree that this was an attempt to drive young Catholics out of the PSNI, and to drive a wedge between it and the community? Does he agree that the best way to avoid that is for us to stand shoulder to shoulder with those police officers and give them our full support?

Mr Paterson: I am very grateful for the hon. Lady's supportive comments. She rightly paid tribute to the Kerr family. I again quote Mrs Kerr, who yesterday said:

"I urge all Catholic members not to be deterred".

I do not believe that they will be.

Mr Ben Wallace (Wyre and Preston North) (Con): The thing that sets the Provisional IRA apart from the dissident republicans is that in the early 1990s the Provisional IRA recognised that above what it wanted was what the public and community wanted, and that the community did not want violence as a way of solving the troubles. Will the Secretary of State take this opportunity to tell us whether the whole Catholic community is fully behind the family of Constable Kerr, and will he consider redoubling his efforts to ensure that more Catholics join the PSNI?

Mr Paterson: My hon. Friend gives me an excellent opportunity to confirm that to my knowledge there is overwhelming support for the legitimate institutions and for the legitimate, peaceful parties-I cite as an example the minute's silence at the Gaelic Athletics Association game yesterday in Tyrone, which is a very strong republican area. There is absolutely no place for political violence in Northern Ireland.

Paul Goggins (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): May I also join the Secretary of State in extending my deepest sympathy to Mrs Kerr and her family? Does he share my concern that, more than two years on, those who were charged with the murder of Constable Stephen Carroll are still to come to trial? Will he take this opportunity to voice his strong support for Minister Ford's efforts to speed up the justice system in Northern Ireland, so that those who go out to murder police officers will be reminded not only that they will be caught, but that if they are convicted they will spend most if not the whole of the rest of their lives in prison?

Mr Paterson: The right hon. Gentleman will have direct experience of these matters and I know that there has been frustration in the past about the slowness of the system, so I congratulate Justice Minister Ford on having introduced measures to speed things up. I also point out that there were 17 charges in 2009, that the number jumped to 80 in 2010 and that there have already been 16 charges this year, so we are definitely bringing in measures to speed things up.

Patrick Mercer (Newark) (Con): The death of Constable Kerr is obviously an extremely sad event, but will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating the policemen and soldiers who cleared a 40 lb anti-personnel device this time last week in the centre of Londonderry, and will he explain whether he believes that the two incidents are linked?

Mr Paterson: I thank my hon. Friend for that question and I am happy to put on the record my wholehearted congratulations-I touched on this in my statement-of the work not just of the PSNI but of the Garda Síochána, who are working extremely closely. I think we should pay tribute to the co-operation we are getting from the Dublin Government, from both parties. I have talked to Eamon Gilmore-the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Tánaiste-and to Alan Shatter, the Minister for Justice, Equality and Defence. Today, I also talked to Martin Callinan, the Commissioner, and I confirm that we are working extremely closely. My hon. Friend is right that there has been a succession of events, week after week; I would not want to comment today on whether they are linked to this one, but we are determined to work together and bear down on these dangerous people.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the Secretary of State on his leadership at this time, which is much appreciated by MPs from Northern Ireland. We do not want to be dragged back to the past and the dark history that we had for many years. I am aware that there has been a large reduction in the number of police officers, which might have fallen to approximately 7,000. What steps will the Secretary of State be taking in relation to resources and training to ensure that the stipulated 7,500 figure is reached through the urgent and immediate training of officers to ensure that we have significant and adequate police coverage on the ground?

Mr Paterson: On police numbers, we have contributed major extra funds this year, as requested by the Chief Constable. I repeat what he said today:

"We have the resources, we have the resilience and we have the commitment."

How he divides up the funds that have been provided to him and the Justice Minister are a matter for him. Those are operational matters and not for me to answer from here.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): I thank the Secretary of State for the statement that he has unfortunately had to make today. Our thoughts are with the Kerr family, the policing family and all those for whom the awful events of the weekend have been a dreadful reminder of their own trauma. The Secretary of State rightly commended the strength of political unity. Does he agree that it is hugely important, in the context of the election campaign, that all parties make it clear that there is no political difficulty or difference that these terrorists can exploit for their warped agenda? Does he agree that Constable Kerr was a patriot and that those who killed him were not? He was a patriot who was honouring his country in the service of all in his community.

Mr Paterson: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question. I entirely endorse his comments about Constable Kerr, who could have pursued another career. He had a university degree in a totally separate subject but he decided to work in his community for the benefit of the community. I entirely endorse the hon. Gentleman's comments about the behaviour of local politicians and local parties. The election campaign of the next few weeks is a glorious opportunity to rebut everything that these violent terrorists stand for. The election should be entirely about day-to-day issues. As I have said, I encourage every voter to participate and turn out. I encourage them to put these people in their place and show them that they have absolutely no representation or support anywhere in the community in Northern Ireland.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): If the Provisional IRA could not achieve its aims over 30 years, despite all the crimes and atrocities it committed, why should the dissident republicans believe they can succeed?

Mr Paterson: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's question. To put it bluntly, they will not succeed, but one has to ask what on earth they think they achieved by ending this bright young man's career just as it began.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State welcome the strong support from Secretary of State Clinton in her condemnation of this brutal murder? Will he assure the people of America that there is no support in the United Kingdom, in Northern Ireland, in the Republic or in the American Government for these brutal murderers who should be brought to justice as a matter of urgency?

Mr Paterson: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his question. We have had unstinting support from both parties in Washington and I was touched that Hillary Clinton, given everything else that is going on in the world, put out a very strong statement condemning this "cowardly act", which she said represented the "failures of the past". She said that the perpetrators' actions

"run counter to the achievements, aspirations and collective will of the people of Northern Ireland".

I spoke to Congressman King last night, who is the chairman of the Friends of Ireland group. He, too, has put out an extremely strong statement, which we all welcome.