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27/69. NORTHERN IRELAND

Mr. Harold Wilson, Prime Minister,
in reply to Parliamentary Questions
in the House of Commons on May 22nd,
1969:

In a statement on his meeting with the new Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, Major James Chichester-Clark,* Mr. Harold Wilson told the House of Commons on May 22nd that he had had a useful exchange of views on matters of common concern. These included the momentum of social reform, security and public order, and the prospects and plans for the Northern Ireland economy.

The Prime Minister continued:

"We were glad to hear from Major Chichester-Clerk that the Northern Ireland Government intend to introduce at the earliest possible moment legislation to provide that the next local government elections shall be held on the basis of universal adult suffrage and without any element of multiple voting. They are proposing to defer the local government elections which would otherwise be due in May 1970 until October 1971, by which time a re-organized pattern of local government for Northern Ireland will have been established. They aim to publish this autumn a White Paper making detailed proposals for the perimeter boundaries, functions and finance of the substantially reduced number of new local authorities.

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* Discussions with Major James Chichester-Clerk, who succeeded Captain Terence O'Neill as Prime Minister of Northern Ireland on May 1, took place on May 21. The Prime Minister was accompanied by his Deputy, Senator John Andrews, and by the Ministers for Development and Home Affairs, Mr. Brian Faulkner and Mr. Robert Porter.

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The ... Ministers affirmed their intention to ensure that the important task of designating electoral areas within these new authorities -- that is, ward boundaries -- will be carried out in a way which will be clearly seen to be fair and impartial.

"We were also told that they hope to issue to their local authorities during the summer a model points scheme for allocation of houses. While it would be impracticable to oblige local authorities to adopt a particular scheme, all authorities will be expected to submit for approval a scheme of demonstrable fairness which can be published and made available to potential applicants.

"On procedures for remedying grievances ... Sir Edmund Compton will be taking up his duties as Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration for Northern Ireland as soon as the relevant Bill receives the Royal Assent. Northern Ireland Ministers also propose to introduce in the present session of their Parliament a Bill to establish machinery to consider citizens' grievances against public authorities other than central government departments. This machinery will deal with grievances arising from the operation of local authorities.

"We discussed the Special Powers Acts and the particular question of the derogation to the European Human Rights Convention which has to be entered because of certain regulations made under those Acts. Northern Ireland Ministers appreciate our desire that this source of embarrassment should be removed as soon as possible, but clearly this will require first a period of calm.

"I expressed to Northern Ireland Ministers our desire that the commitment of troops for guard duties at vital installations in Northern Ireland should be discontinued as soon as possible but accepted that they must remain for the time being. The Northern Ireland Ministers outlined to us their plans for increasing recruitment to the Royal Ulster Constabulary which we all agreed was desirable.

"Finally, we had a lengthy discussion about employment prospects and industrial development in

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Northern Ireland."

Replying to supplementary questions following his statement, Mr. Wilson expressed his firm opinion that the Ministers with whom the discussions had been carried on were fully representative of the new Government.

"I felt that they were speaking as one in accepting not only the need for reform but the timing which Major Chichester-Clark proposes. We shall remain watchful. That is necessary in this situation. The best way to ensure that there will be the rapid progress made which the whole House desires to see made, is for Northern Ireland to have a period of calm and quiet -- and I am referring to extremists of one point of view and the Paisleyites who have been demonstrating in Edinburgh. I believe that there is at long last a desire and possibility in the Stormont to do the job which must be done."

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(Prev. Ref. 22/69)

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