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NEWS

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date 8 MAY 1975

OPENING STATEMENT OF THE CHAIRMAN - THE Rt. Hon. Sir Robert Lowry
THURSDAY 8 MAY 1975: PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS, STORMONT

Members of the Constitutional Convention,

You have heard read the Order under which this Convention is summoned. And the Order in turn has been made pursuant to the Act of Parliament which provided for the election and holding of the Convention. In that Act the purpose of the Convention is described. It is to consider what provision for the government of Northern Ireland is likely to command the most widespread acceptance throughout the community here. When we have given this weighty matter our fullest consideration, it will be our duty to report our conclusions to the Secretary of State that they may be laid before that same Parliament which has provided for your election and has appointed our task.

In order that the work of the Convention may begin, it is necessary that we be properly organised and equipped. Here let me take the opportunity of thanking the party leaders and the individual members who, having come at my request to see me gave me much help and encouragement. I also thank the party whips who have arranged matters so efficiently and so amicably among themselves in co-operation with our most competent and helpful Clerk to the Convention and his experienced staff. I need not dwell on these preliminaries save to say that the spirit and manner in which they have been transacted provide a most happy augury.

Presently a Motion will be put before you, again by agreement of the parties, for the purpose of appointing a committee to settle our rules of procedure with all convenient speed. In the meantime the Secretary of State has helpfully included in

his directions a set of rules to serve us until we have evolved our own. At the close of to-day's proceedings I ask you to be good enough to sign the roll of members and I look forward at that stage to the pleasure of welcoming you individually to the Convention.

The arrangements which I have so far described have been harmonious. But the events which have led to the setting up of the Convention present a sadly contrasting picture. For all but seven years the community has been torn and wounded by deep and unhappy differences. Our people have drained the cup of suffering. Some have been touched more closely and more poignantly than others, but no-one has escaped and no home and no family has been immune. The days of our affliction have been long. Parliament has decreed this Convention. Our duty has been prescribed by statute. You, the members, have been elected by those same people.

This is not the time, nor is your Chairman the man, to trace the lamentable series of events which has brought us to this pass. Our responsibility now is grave. We are not a legislative assembly; we are a deliberative body. The people in Northern Ireland and far beyond regard our prospects and will follow our actions with an anxious attention which even Parliament, for all its great powers, can scarcely command. In town and country, on farm and in factory, men and women ask themselves what will be the outcome. Even those who are near to despair have moments when they dare to hope, while only the most sanguine are filled with assurance. Few, I believe, can be indifferent.

This Convention should be a "coming together", as the name implies, to pursue our object by reasoned discussion and, with goodwill, to reach some common ground. For you, the members, to whom has been entrusted this great responsibility, the burden is great and the opportunity unlimited. I have, as Chairman, already pledged myself as the servant of the Convention and all its members. I now re-dedicate myself to that service. To say "all its members" is important, because the voice of the individual should be heard and even a minority of one must not speak in vain.

Truely it can be said of Ulstew that her children are gone into captivity - a terrible captivity involving their hearts and minds. Can we help to deliver those children? I should despair indeed if I thought that we could not. I adjure you then that you be not discouraged by the new prophets of woe, but rather that you set before your eyes the words of an older and greater prophet - "In quietness and in confidence shall be your strength." It is in quietness and in confidence that, as I devoutly trust, we shall embark on an earnest, sincere and dedicated quest for the solution to our ills.