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Stormont Castle, Belfast

25 March 1976

STATEMENT BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND, MR MERLYN REES, MP,  
IN A DEBATE IN THE COMMONS TODAY:

On 5 March I told the House that direct rule in Northern Ireland will continue; that it will be positive and not negative; and that the Government will continue to discharge fully its responsibility for all aspects of the affairs of Northern Ireland. It is, therefore, appropriate that this House should now be debating security and the economy since these are two major problems to which the Government give overriding priority.

First, security. The object of the Government's policy has been throughout to eradicate terrorism from Northern Ireland. The security forces are now bringing more and more people before the courts and I shall say more about this. It is much to be welcomed; but by itself this is insufficient. The terrorist will continue to exist so long as he has enough public support to provide him with a safe haven. But the terrorist can no longer be sure of this in Northern Ireland. The reason is clear. Increasingly, people know the terrorist for what he is in Northern Ireland. Experience has taught again and again that the rule of law is the rule of a stable society. It is my strong view that the existence of detention not only estranged a part of the Northern Ireland community; it also cast a shadow over the law itself. Now that no-one is in detention, there is no doubt in my mind that in minority areas there has been a change of attitude; and this is reflected by the increased co-operation given to the security forces in dealing with terrorists.

Progress is only securely made if it is in accordance with the rule of law. Some people affect to believe that if only the security forces could escape from

political restraints, they could soon and expeditiously deal with terrorism. But there are no political restraints on the security forces in discharging their duty to catch terrorists and bring them before the courts. Those who seek simplistic solutions to the security problems by what they call "war" on the terrorists display their own limited outlook - they seek to destroy society and the rule of law in order to save it. This is no solution for terrorism: it plays into the terrorist's hands. We cannot ignore the lessons of Irish history.

Although I consider it essential that we should operate through the law, this does not mean, however, that the law itself is immutable. Indeed, we are constantly considering whether we can make improvements - the House will recall that a number of new offences were created by the Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) (Amendment) Act 1975 following the report of the Gardiner Committee. The important thing is that the law as changed should be fair and just and be accepted as such.

There are many difficulties in changing the law and in making it more effective to deal with the problems of terrorism. The Gardiner Committee recommended a new offence of terrorism but as the Attorney General said in winding up the Debate on the second reading of the Emergency Provisions (Amendment) Bill last June we felt that it was better to make individual offences as clear and specific as possible, and new offences of recruiting to an illegal organisation and training others in the use of arms and explosives were introduced.

I have several times explained to the House the difficulties in prosecuting for membership of a proscribed organisation. It has been urged upon the Government that they should adopt a provision similar to that operating in the Irish Republic under which prosecutions can rest upon a declaration by a Chief Superintendent of the Garda, that to the best of his belief a man is a member of the IRA. I understand why this provision can be used in the Republic but to translate it to Northern Ireland where there is a divided community would not be acceptable; and it would set back the acceptability of the police throughout the community which above all is important in pursuing terrorism.

I mention these as some of the difficulties but we continue to seek ways in which by change in the law the actions of the security forces in dealing with terrorism can be assisted. I will not hesitate to bring fresh legislation before the House to this end as solutions are found. The House will know that the Report of the Law Commission on Conspiracy and Criminal Law Reform was published on Tuesday. I am, with my colleagues, studying this Report and will pay particular regard to its application to Northern Ireland in our continuing studies.

The problem always facing the Government is the sometimes wilful ignorance of some people in Northern Ireland about what is being achieved in the security field. We give this information in Northern Ireland on a weekly basis; and quarterly statistics are placed in the House of Commons Library. In addition, we have mounted a campaign in the Northern Ireland press to give factual information. The Army and the police get very tired of politically motivated criticisms of their activities. It is, in fact, the successes of the RUC and the Army, aided by the significantly growing number of people who now voluntarily help and give information to the police, that provides hope for the future.

In 1974, 1,073 persons were convicted of scheduled offences; in 1975 the figure was 1,090. At present, nearly 900 people charged with serious offences are awaiting trial. So far this year, 274 persons have been charged with terrorist-type offences including 45 with murder or attempted murder. No less than 66 persons have been charged with firearms offences, and 63 with explosives offences. Since the beginning of the year, the security forces have found or neutralised over 15,000 lbs of explosives. 156 weapons have been recovered. How many lives have these successes of the security forces saved? Do these remarkable figures indicate inactivity by the security forces? Do they support the shameful allegations that, for some incomprehensible political reason, the Government is restraining the security forces in Northern Ireland?

The success rate in recovering explosives found in the past two months is a remarkable story. But we hear only too little of these successes. Worse, we are sometimes told that the security forces are deliberately inactive.

Then there are those people who drive across parts of the Province and allege that they see no soldiers. The GOC deploys his soldiers for operational, and not for presentational, reasons. But in 1975, there were 4,903,878 searches of vehicles and 30,092 house searches. 377 travelling gunmen were charged in 1975. Can anyone justifiably say that not enough is being done? As I have said, it is for the GOC to decide how to deploy his troops, and it would not be in the public interest to disclose details of troop movements.

The House will know that, despite the continued successes of the security forces, terrible incidents continue to occur in Northern Ireland. But to illustrate the effectiveness of the police and the Army, let me give a few examples. Two men have just been jailed for life for the murder of 19-year-old William Hardy who was kidnapped and shot in the head last September; I understand that two men have been charged with the murder of an electricity board worker by a booby trap

bomb in Belfast on 27 February; I also understand that three men have been charged with the murders of three women in a house on the outskirts of Belfast on 15 February.

The Government for its part will do everything it can to assist the people of Northern Ireland to uphold the rule of law through the Army and the police. We continue to promote co-operation with the Government of the Republic who have themselves had conspicuous success this year in dealing with terrorists. Terrorists must be concerned at the recovery of explosives by the two Governments. We recovered 5 tons in 1975 and have almost recovered 5 tons already in 1976. I understand that some 7 tons of explosive has been found in the South recently, a good deal of it in transit to the North.

But successes against the terrorist are only a means to an end. That end is the restoration of law and order in Northern Ireland. We must look forward. It is for this reason that I and Ministerial colleagues in other Departments are now examining the action and resources required for the next few years to maintain law and order, how best to achieve the primacy of the police, the size and role of locally recruited forces and the progressive reduction of the armed forces as soon as is safely practicable. The establishment of the RUC is now 6,500 and with a strength of 5,000 there is no immediate restraint on recruiting. It is only in the context of the effectiveness of the police that we can talk about the reduction of the Army, but I want to make it clear that it is the determination of the Government to keep the Army in Northern Ireland as long as necessary. The Defence Review does not affect this determination.

We are re-examining the establishment figure of the RUC with the Police Authority. I am also examining the role of the Police Authority and, without prejudice to this, plan for new appointments when existing appointments expire in June. This is all part and parcel of the Government's desire to restore the primacy of the police in Northern Ireland.

Since the publication of the White Paper in 1974, we have steadily progressed with the difficult task of restoring the primacy of the police. Since my announcement of the extension of policing in September of that year, the RUC has increased in size by 500, and the RUC Reserve by over 2,000. There are other factors, all of which have contributed to restoring the rule of law in Northern Ireland - the release of all detainees, the ending of special category status for those committing offences after 1 March, the realisation that there will be no amnesty, and the knowledge that those who commit crimes will be taken through the courts. These factors show the Government's resolve.

These are all aspects of the Government's concern that normality should return to Northern Ireland. The Chief Constable is subject to no-one on operational matters; the courts are independent; and the Northern Ireland Director of Public Prosecutions has statutory responsibility for prosecutions in Northern Ireland. This is all as it should be.

The other major problem which must have overriding priority is the economy. The management of the economy will be a major aspect of positive direct rule.

The House is familiar with the nature of the economic problems. I will mention only one figure, that for unemployment: the number of unemployed in Northern Ireland now stands above 50,000. About 1 in 10 of the workforce is out of work. There are some parts of the Province where the figures are 3 times as bad, and even worse. JK

Mr rt hon Friend may have more to say on the economy at the end of the debate, if he is left time to do so.

This however I will say. The strict operation of the market forces would lead to very great economic problems in Northern Ireland - much greater than they are now. WLL

Naturally Northern Ireland has to play its part in the Government's economic strategy. Within that broad requirement the Government's public expenditure plans are by no means ungenerous to Northern Ireland. Over the next 5 years the broad picture for Northern Ireland is not that there will be severe retrenchment in public expenditure; it is rather that expenditure will level off. There is still provision for growth in the programmes of the greatest social and economic significance - housing, health and personal social services, education and industrial development. What is more, in all major programmes except roads and environmental services, as a reflection of the greater need, public expenditure per head in Northern Ireland will be significantly higher throughout the 5 years of the planning period than it will be in Great Britain as a whole. This is the answer to people who claim to see evidence of the Government's intention to withdraw economically from Northern Ireland.

The House will shortly be considering a proposed Order in Council whose main purpose will be to establish the Northern Ireland Development Agency. We shall also be examining the structure of the Economic Council, to see whether it can be re-organised in a way which will enable it to play an even bigger role in the economic life of the country.

Because of the severity of the economic problems now facing Northern Ireland we have decided on a wide-ranging review of economic and industrial strategy. The House was told about this in an answer to a Question which I gave last week. We do not expect to find any panacea. But we must take the measure of the problems and see whether the existing ways of dealing with them are adequate.

I have spoken so far about two of the key problems that we face in Northern Ireland. Security and the economy. But in the last few minutes I would like to put a slightly wider view. It is a view that I have put before this House consistently. The responsibility for Northern Ireland rests with the Government and with this House. It is part of the United Kingdom. The problems I have talked about are part of what is meant by direct rule; I could have talked about other aspects of it. I could have talked, for example, about the important work done by the Ministers and the Civil Servants working for the Departments of Health and Social Services or Education. These too are a part of direct rule. There is no question of there being a vacuum.

My own belief is that the recent public opinion polls which indicate that a very large number of people in Northern Ireland accept with equanimity, and even approval, the idea of continued direct rule are not too far off the mark. The same polls, if they are right, show a worrying increase in the number of people who are prepared to accept the use of violence to further political aims. To the extent that there is truth in this, then we must continue and increase our efforts on the security front, and to this end I shall be renewing, in the course of the summer, the Emergency Provisions Act. And the House should know that I have not hesitated to make full use of the powers available to me under the Prevention of Terrorism Act. I shall also renew the Direct Rule legislation.

We shall also be putting our minds to the difficult problem of handling legislation for Northern Ireland. But I want to make clear that the responsibility to the House for Northern Ireland affairs rests with me and my Ministers.

Above all, what we need to do is to concentrate upon giving Northern Ireland good government, fair government and firm government. I do not claim that we shall in this way provide a solution to all the problems of Northern Ireland, but then I do not myself believe, in the light of history or of my own experience over the past two years, that there are any easy solutions to the problem of Northern Ireland. The beginning of wisdom in Northern Ireland affairs is to accept this.

Our task and our responsibility must be to govern. This we shall do. And to share our ideas on security and the economic situation is an important part of this process.