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For Sir [unclear] 1.12.1976

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SPEECH BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND, THE RT HON ROY MASON MP, TO EDITORS OF NORTHERN IRELAND WEEKLY NEWSPAPERS AT A LUNCH IN STORMONT CASTLE TODAY:

It is often said that the English do not really understand Ireland or the Irish. There is some truth in this, although it can equally be said that the Irish do not always set a very good example of understanding one another. Indeed misconceptions abound on both sides of the Border as well as on both sides of the Irish Sea and even more so in countries abroad.

The basic misconception is the misguided belief that the problem is a simple one and can be dealt with at a single stroke. You know as well as I do that there are no single stroke politics in Northern Ireland. If only the British would get out, one argument goes, the people of Northern Ireland left to themselves would settle their differences and find the solution. Others advocate a return to simply majority rule and to what they remember as the good old days of peace under the old Stormont regime. Still others see the problem as a purely military one of making all out war against the terrorists and defeating the enemy. There is no shortage of advice - there are almost as many solutions suggested as there are people. There are at least seven identifiable political parties plus other movements in Northern Ireland each with their own view of the nature of the problem and of the right solution to it.

A few years ago it would have been stated as a self-evident truth that the majority of the population in Northern Ireland wanted nothing more than to remain British and the minority were only interested in joining their fellow Irishmen in a United Ireland. Everyone believed that the Republic of Ireland was intent on taking over the North as

soon as it possibly could and whatever the wishes of the majority of its population were.

All of these assumptions, all of these ingrained beliefs, are now being questioned in one degree or another. Attitudes change, even in Ireland. Traditional attitudes in the North are also beginning to change, there can be no doubt about that. It is early days yet and the process of change is slow, as it is bound to be. Nor are peoples' thoughts all moving neatly in the same direction or towards the same solution.

There is, as I have said before, a whirlpool of political thought and ideas. But there are, I believe, three distinguishing features.

First and foremost, there is the increasing determination of ordinary men and women, of peace-loving people, to reject violence as a means of settling differences and advancing political causes. To say that seven years is enough is not particularly original, but the publicity the Government has given to this simple thought has struck a chord in Northern Ireland, of that I have no doubt.

Secondly there is a growing recognition among people that it is in Northern Ireland itself that a solution to the problems must be worked out and that this solution must be of a kind which enables everyone to share a Northern Ireland identity.

Thirdly, there have been signs of a greater willingness of the opposing factions to talk over the problems together, and to seek common ground. I have sometimes spoken of the reconnaissance between the SDLP and the Official Unionists. It is out of such discussions, as they develop, that trust and understanding can emerge.

Now let me make clear that the aim of the Government is the return of devolved government in a form which is stable and durable. In other words in a form which commands the support of the vast majority of the population. The principle of devolution is one thing on which all political parties in Northern Ireland agree and it accords with the natural instincts of the large proportion of the public in Northern Ireland and, indeed, throughout the United Kingdom. Our policy is to create the conditions in which a stable and durable devolved Government becomes possible. One cannot, however, impose an agreement on the people of Northern Ireland - nor indeed on anyone - nor even force them to come to agreement among themselves. We can encourage the politicians to talk over their problems with each other and to respond to shifts in public opinion and we can make it clear that we shall lend a ready ear to anything they want to say to us as their exchanges and discussions move forward.

The public are increasingly showing their will to achieve reconciliation and their desire for peace and stability. The Women's Peace Movement is a clear sign of

this. Even the unreal discussions of independence are an indication of the wish to re-establish the identity and the unity of Ulster. But the people look to the politicians in Northern Ireland for leadership. Are they going to fail and to leave progress to their successors or to leave the stage to others? Are they going to be the men of yesteryear?

I believe the time is ripe for devolution. There is a strong tide flowing now with the discussions over Scotland and Wales. It would be a pity if Northern Ireland should now lag behind Scotland and Wales. There is, moreover, the present under-representation of Northern Ireland at Westminster; a constitutional settlement would open the way for change here.

If the basis of agreement is present there need be no problems about implementation. Let all the parties show their commitment to devolution by demonstrating their desire to participate with others in a new system of devolved government. The Government will not be slow to respond. I ask the political parties - or better still ask them to ask themselves - whether they are ready to confess to their own people that once again they have failed to secure for them what others in the United Kingdom are getting. Scotland and Wales are moving on: is Northern Ireland to be left behind?

The aim for Northern Ireland should be the creation of a society where elections are about economic or social problems and not on sectarian issues; a society to which all the inhabitants of Northern Ireland feel that they belong, and within which each individual believes that he enjoys similar status and influence to his neighbour, irrespective of his religion or origin.

Until devolution, this is what direct rule will seek to provide. Let me make it absolutely clear that the Government intend to do what is the business of government and that is to govern. There must be no doubts or misunderstandings about this. The Government have both the will and the ability to govern Northern Ireland. Direct rule may not be the ideal form of government for Northern Ireland but it is workable and can be sustained and I shall not shirk my responsibility to do my best for the people of Northern Ireland.

Direct rule can and will also be improved and I shall make full use of existing Northern Ireland Institutions. In particular, I look forward to a reconstituted and more effective Economic Council and I am considering how best to involve District Councils on a wider range of consultations. I shall welcome constructive criticism about the way that direct rule is administered and about the economic and social policies that are pursued. I want criticisms of substance, however, and not slogans such as wild accusations about withdrawal.

Rumours of impending withdrawal, be it of the Army or of economic resources, have no foundation whatsoever in fact. Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom and will remain so unless a majority of the population decide otherwise in a referendum. That is a solemn undertaking, and a solid guarantee, by Her Majesty's Government. As for the Army, they will be reduced in numbers or withdrawn to barracks only as they are no longer needed to help the police in the maintenance of law and order - not a moment sooner or later.

Let me end with one very simple message. Major constitutional changes in the United Kingdom are in the offing. Are the political leaders in Northern Ireland going to sleep through these events? If they do, Northern Ireland may find that the tide of Devolution has left them behind. The responsibility for reaching agreement, for finding the formula rests here. Are the political parties in Northern Ireland ready to act and find agreement? I ask them all to bear in mind:

"There is a tide in the affairs of men, which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune,

Omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and in miseries,

On such a full sea are we now afloat and we must take the current when it serves,

Or lose our ventures."