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Stormont Castle

2 May 1977

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the Rt Hon Roy Mason MP, met Mr Ian Paisley MP and Mr Ernest Baird at Stormont Castle following a request from Mr Paisley.

The Secretary of State made it clear that he was seeing Mr Paisley and Mr Baird as leaders of political parties.

Mr Mason said he was glad to have the opportunity of saying to them at first hand that the actions which they were proposing posed a major threat to the economy of the Province and to the livelihood of very many people. The progress which had been made in the past few months in the saving of thousands of jobs in industry could be seriously affected. Within the past few days a massive order had been won for Belfast shipyard; the go-ahead had been given for work to proceed at Kilroot Power Station saving 1,000 jobs and 10,000 further jobs had been saved by the retention of the Selective Employment Premium. This was the real way to tackle the problems of Northern Ireland.

Leaders of opinion in trade unions, management, the churches and in all the political parties except their's had made it clear beyond doubt that they were opposed to the action which Mr Paisley and Mr Baird, in association with paramilitary groups and with the expressed support of illegal organisations, intended. The Secretary of State said this was not an industrial dispute and therefore people posing as "pickets" in order to intimidate workers would be acting outside the law.

On security, Mr Mason said he fully understood the concern felt by many people. He emphasised his determination to end the violence and disruption created by the Provisional IRA.

The RUC were playing a major role in the drive against them. RUC numbers were expanding, their expertise, organisation and equipment were rapidly being improved and they could always rely upon the army's support where required.

The number of special Security Forces, such as the SAS, had been substantially increased and this trend would continue.

The Secretary of State impressed upon Mr Paisley and Mr Baird that the diversion of the security forces from this vital task was totally against the interest of the Province.

If the Province were now to be brought to a standstill who would be the winners? The so-called Loyalists would in fact have fought the Provisional IRA's battle for them.

It would be ironic if action by the supporters of Mr Paisley and Mr Baird were to cripple the economy in a way that the IRA had failed to do.

The Secretary of State emphasised that all three major parties in Parliament supported the policies being followed in Northern Ireland. He warned Mr Paisley and Mr Baird that the course of action which they proposed was in fact direct opposition to Her Majesty's Government and a defiance of the will of Parliament.

Mr Mason said that he wished therefore to leave no doubt in their minds that the rights of people to work would be protected. The RUC would take all steps within their powers to ensure that the law was respected and, where required, they would have the support of the army. He had asked for additional troops to come to Northern Ireland as a prudent contingency measure. Their role, in support of the RUC, would be to protect and help where required and to be ready should an upsurge of terrorism occur while regular forces were being diverted from their essential tasks.

Mr Mason said that in a situation such as now existed he and Mr Paisley, as Members of Parliament, must be of one view on the subject of the undemocratic exercise of intimidation and violence which would inevitably be practised by those who sought to coerce the working people of Northern Ireland.

All practicable measures would be taken to deal firmly with such action. He asked Mr Paisley and Mr Baird to make it clear publicly, without equivocation or qualification, that they were totally opposed to the use of intimidation or violence.