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SPEECH BY THE MINISTER OF STATE, LORD GOWRIE, TO THE IRISH ASSOCIATION OF EUROPEAN JOURNALISTS IN BELFAST ON THURSDAY 28 OCTOBER 1982

It is just one week since the electorate went to the polls. The results of the election have been represented by the press as a landslide for Sinn Fein and a major setback for the Government. Neither of these statements is true. I want to try to set out why we embarked on the course we have chosen, what the election means, and where we go from here.

Our broad approach was described in the White Paper published in March. There we put forward our belief that while direct rule - the government of Northern Ireland by Ministers who belong to one of the main British political parties - may be the second choice of everyone in Northern Ireland, it had serious drawbacks. We saw a need to try to breathe new life into politics, not simply for its own sake, but because while the political process in Northern Ireland remains stagnant, it will be that much harder to tackle the tremendous economic, social, political and security problems which beset the Province. We wanted to involve Northern Ireland politicians in running the affairs of the Province, with the long-term aim of assisting and encouraging the creation of a political consensus. This would first be on everyday and relatively non-controversial issues, then perhaps on more basic matters such as the political foundation of the State - even if such a consensus would be no more than an agreement to differ in a civilized way and within agreed civil parameters.

On embarking on this pattern we made three points very clear. First, we openly and fully acknowledged that there are in Northern Ireland two communities, one predominantly British in outlook, one predominantly Irish. We acknowledged that both these identities enjoy equal rights and status, and that it is perfectly right and proper for those who consider themselves predominantly Irish to play their part in a political life which was primarily oriented towards the Republic. Always providing of course that such a part in political life was played within the same civil and peaceful parameters.

Secondly, we went on to say that because of these special circumstances, for any system of administration to work in Northern Ireland it has to be acceptable to both parts of the community. As history has shown, no system which cannot meet this criterion - whether Stormont in the late sixties or the Assembly of 1974 - has been able to survive. A system of local administration must depend upon certain minimal intercommunal agreements. Our proposals for "rolling devolution" therefore were couched as an offer, and it was made clear that even if this offer were not taken up, the Assembly would have an important job to do in improving direct rule and making the "governors" more responsive to the "governed".

Thirdly, we stressed the Anglo-Irish dimension. Our two islands, as well as our two States, are closely linked by ties of shared history, culture and kinship. We are members together of the Economic Community. The things that pull us together are far more powerful and important than those which divide us. As you know, two years ago we embarked on an attempt consciously to draw our two countries together. By so doing we had in mind not just our mutual interests as States, but a belief that a close Anglo-Irish relationship between London and Dublin is essential to help resolve the intercommunal tensions in Northern Ireland. It is equally essential to the building of those pluralist political arrangements without which each community in Northern Ireland will always believe itself to be threatened by the other.

As the text of the White Paper made clear, the pursuit of a closer Anglo-Irish relationship was not an alternative to our

plans for an Assembly, or a decorative frill for the Nationalist Community, but an equal leg of a considered policy. The two arise from the one analysis of the problem. They go together.

That is the background. Where do we stand today?

First, let me deal with the election. You have all seen the verdict of the press which, frankly, has been a little bit glib. We should not lose sight of the fact that the SDLP have actually increased their proportion of the vote since the local government elections of May 1982. So have Alliance. The SDLP won 14 seats, Alliance no fewer than 10. Sinn Fein won 5 seats, with a vote just 2 per cent or so up on the H-Block vote of May 1981 - and with the IIP not standing.

I am not trying to play the Sinn Fein vote down, but to put it into perspective. Sinn Fein and what it stands for has been a feature of the political landscape throughout this century. There is nothing new, nothing in current circumstances particularly surprising, that it commands a core of support. That support has always been there although it has not always turned out to vote in elections. And that support will not wither until it feels free to express the cultural identity from which it springs. Our job is to see that that identity can pursue legitimate politics in legitimate ways. So what I am trying to do now is to put the result into perspective. That is of course what 73 out of 78 elected members would presumably want me to do.

If we now turn simply to the Unionist side of the fence one would be, I think, rather hard put to find evidence there of a great swing to extremism. Rather the reverse.

Now lastly what is the response of the Government to the results of the election? We press ahead with the plans for the Assembly which have been approved by Parliament overwhelmingly and supported by all the major political parties in the United Kingdom. I might add too that I think we have a clear duty towards the overwhelming majority of those elected recently who do want the Assembly to work, at least in its preliminary role of scrutinising direct rule and seeking to make it more accountable. The Secretary of State is in the process of consulting the parties about a date for the first meeting, which will be next month.

We are convinced that it is in the interests of the Province to open our activities to the keen gaze of local politicians. We hope the committees of the Assembly in particular will develop a high degree of expertise in their subjects and help ensure that an authoritative Northern Ireland voice is directly heard, - and this has a bearing on the wider political issues as well.

We deeply regret that not all elected representatives will take their seats in the Assembly when it meets. I hope we can show the SDLP in particular that they have much to gain and nothing to lose by doing so. But we accept the verdict of the ballot box. We accept the status of SDLP abstentionist members as elected representatives and will deal with them accordingly. But it is impossible for any government to treat with Sinn Fein representatives on matters other than constituency matters so long as they fail to condemn terrorism. The horror of the events of the last few days drives home to us once more how great is the gap between democratic politics and the politics of the men of violence, from whichever community they spring. But as I have said we do recognise that Sinn Fein members have a representative role where their constituents are concerned and we will order our response accordingly.

Our offer of devolution remains, on terms set by Parliament that are known to all. The sooner local representatives feel ready to take it up the better in our view. But while they feel unable to do so we shall press on with the first phase of the Assembly.

And we shall remain alert to every opportunity to reconstruct the Anglo-Irish relationship. It is quite essential to the peace and progress of this community and all of us know it.

And lastly we shall continue to give unremitting support to the security forces in their struggle against terrorists and paramilitaries of both communities. I acknowledge the work of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, at this particularly tragic time, and also the work which they have done so magnificently with the Garda in the Republic.

The moral of the last few days is a simple one: to postpone political movement in response to terrorism would be a surrender to terrorism and a victory for men of violence everywhere.