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SPEECH BY SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

Rt Hon PETER MANDELSON MP

Patten Commission on the Royal Ulster Constabulary House of Commons

Thursday 6 April 2000

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OPENING STATEMENT - SECRETARY OF STATE

I welcome this opportunity to debate reform of the Royal Ulster Constabulary. It is not a debate between those who are pro or anti the police, or for or against the RUC. We are all for the most effective and representative police service that can be created in Northern Ireland.

During 30 years of conflict the RUC has been both the bulwark against and one of the principal victims of a sustained and brutal terrorist campaign – a position that has led – unfairly – to its being identified more with one side of the community than the other. This, of course, is exaggerated by some for political reasons but it does not remove the essential truth.

Policing in Northern Ireland arouses great passions.

I have heard – often at first hand – the resentment that some of the proposed changes to the RUC has sparked. And I understand the pain that proposed changes to the name and symbols have caused – particularly amongst the family, friends and colleagues of murdered RUC officers. The name, rightly, is a source of great pride to the RUC family.

We all owe the RUC a deep debt of gratitude. And we will never forget the 302 officers who have been killed and the thousands more who have been injured.

Like the Rt Hon Member for Upper Bann I wholeheartedly support the award of the George Cross by Her Majesty to the RUC. It is a richly deserved recognition of the courage and dedication of the RUC – and I include in this regulars, reserves, full-time, part-time, and indeed support staff – and it is a fitting memorial to those who gave their lives.

When, in January, I announced my decisions on reform of the RUC I was mindful of this history and the concerns that change provoked.

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Then, as today, I was clear on one point. These reforms are, emphatically, not an attack on the RUC. They are not about disbanding the Force. Those who advocated that course lost the argument. The proposed changes do not result from the RUC's failure. Quite the opposite.

The RUC has provided a first-class service to the people of Northern Ireland and it continues to do so. That has not changed. But the world, and Northern Ireland is changing, and we must prepare and equip the RUC to embrace that change.

An opportunity has been offered to create an outstanding modern police service, to allow the police to develop in a way they have wanted to for years. To make the transition from an anti-terrorist security force to a community focused and community based police service working, wherever possible, in partnership with the whole community.

Indeed, many of the central planks of the Patten Report – for example, on the size and structure of the police service, on police training, on civilianisation, on community partnership policing, on normalisation of policing, including the amalgamation of Special Branch and Crime Branch and the phasing out of the RUC Reserve – flow directly from the Chief Constable's own Fundamental Review of the RUC conducted 3 years ago. As Les Rodgers, Chairman of the Police Federation, pointed out Patten was 'the adoption in the main of the Fundamental Review'.

Even so, when I was appointed a month after Patten delivered his report, I decided to re-examine all of Patten's recommendations on their merits. I subjected each to the same test: did it contribute to our aim of securing a modern, effective police service for Northern Ireland capable of attracting widespread community support. In a number of cases I found it necessary to modify or alter the way in which a recommendation was to be implemented.

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I have decided, for example:

- that the new police oath should not be taken by serving officers, who have already been attested as Constables;
- that the District Policing Partnerships should initially be purely consultative bodies and that there should be safeguards to exclude anyone convicted at any time of a terrorist offence from being appointed as an independent member of a DPP.

In other matters I have gone to every length to ensure the operational independence of the Chief Constable and his officers from political interference.

I am determined to advance these and other changes in a sensitive and balanced way. But we cannot allow emotions to blind us to the pressing need for change.

The hard reality of policing in Northern Ireland and the reason policing was remitted to the Patten Commission is this:

- while 80% of Protestants are content with policing, less than 50% of Catholics are satisfied, as reported by Patten;
- the annual Community Attitudes Survey shows that, while 70% of Protestants think that police treat the two communities equally, only 30% of Catholics agree;
- in the same survey, three quarters of Catholics and 60% of Protestants hold the view that there are too few Catholics in the police service;

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- 88% of the police are from the Protestant side of the community. This is in spite of the efforts of the Chief Constable and Police Authority to achieve a more balanced service;

I know that IRA intimidation and, in the past, murder has been a significant factor in preventing Catholics from joining the RUC. Such intimidation is disgraceful and must stop. But intimidation is not the only factor.

Peer pressure, lack of community support, lack of identification with the RUC, fear of loss of family contact, and an expectation among Catholics of having to submerge their Nationalist identity have also played a part.

Northern Ireland is a divided society and the issue of policing throws those divides into sharp relief. In order to be fully effective a police force must be representative of the community it serves, it must also command widespread support across that community. That is why I was persuaded that serious changes were needed to redress the extreme religious imbalance.

That included changing the name.

The Patten Report concluded that 'the name of the RUC ... (had) become politicised – one side of the community effectively claiming ownership of the name and that the use of those words ..... must inevitably go some way in inhibiting wholehearted participation in policing'.

My starting point was to challenge this view. I recognised the pain that changing the name would cause and I questioned whether this was really necessary and indispensable in attracting a balance in recruits. And in the end I concluded that it was.

But I did conclude that some small but significant changes to Patten's recommendations were called for.

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For example, the new name, Police Service of Northern Ireland has been modified and will be adopted only when the first new recruits enter through the new recruitment procedures in Autumn 2001. Logically the new badge will be introduced at the same time. I have not decided what this should be, but I am not convinced that it need be entirely neutral – free of association with both ~~either~~ tradition - as recommended.

I have listened carefully to the arguments made by the Right Honourable member for Upper Bann. I acknowledge that many Unionists and many in the police family vigorously oppose the change and I have experienced at first hand their continuing opposition.

But equally it is very clear to me from all that I have heard from Nationalist political, church and community leaders that a change in the name is essential.

And this view is not confined to nationalists.

Editorials in the Belfast Telegraph on 19 and 20 January at the time of the announcement of the Government's decision recognised that while the sacrifices of the RUC should be remembered in a new policing era, 'sadly, there would have been little chance of progress towards a broadly acceptable force without some change in the name and symbols, which were a legacy of the past.'

And the Newsletter said that Unionists 'would do well to take their cue' from the police who would 'take all the changes in its professional stride'.

I want to make absolutely clear: changing the name has nothing to do with the issue of sovereignty or Northern Ireland's constitutional status. Northern Ireland will remain a part of the United Kingdom for so long as that is the wish of a majority of its people. No matter how much smoke some people create,

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the name change is about effective and representative policing - nothing more and nothing else.

Some have accepted, reluctantly, that change of the name is necessary and have expressed the hope that it will be possible to find a way of commemorating the title and the service of the RUC in some form not least in honour of those who have lost their lives. I strongly share that view, and I can announce that I have set work in train to identify appropriate ways of honouring the name in perpetuity by associating it with suitable initiatives.

Ultimately it is what the police do, how representative they are, how they are trained and equipped that matter more than what they are called. The Government is determined to ensure that the police have the necessary resources and capabilities to protect the community and uphold law and order.

We must tackle the live, day-to-day issues: the all-too-frequent paramilitary attacks that inflict terrible suffering and mock the principles of fairness and justice. The arson attacks and all other crimes of violence that wreck lives, wreck homes and deny whole communities their basic right to live free of fear.

There are parts of Northern Ireland in which paramilitaries think that they are not just above the law – they think they are the law. The paramilitaries' grip on such communities need to be tackled and broken.

But to achieve this, the police service must have the confidence of law-abiding people in such communities and needs to be more representative of them, and that is our objective.

The motion also calls for implementation of 'controversial recommendations' to await a 'new dispensation'. I would ask Hon Members to think about this for a moment. The British and Irish Governments and all the Northern Ireland

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political parties have to play a part in creating a new social and political climate. And reform of the RUC is not a consequence or by-product of that climate, it is crucial to creating it and building the new dispensation we seek.

Nonetheless, I can reassure the House that there will be no question of rushing forward with change in the absence of a stable security environment: and from recent events, including the explosion today, we still have some way to go. A number of recommendations depend absolutely on the Chief Constable's assessment of the level of threat, such as:

- phasing out the Full Time Reserve;
- amalgamation of Special Branch and CID;
- progress towards an unarmed police service;
- changes to police buildings and vehicles.

These changes will only be carried forward on the Chief Constable's advice. Taking account of the security situation and the capability of the police as an organisation to absorb huge changes.

Some changes can occur quickly. The Chief Constable has begun the process, and we will see the start of downsizing, and the creation of new district command units, this November. Other changes will take much longer. For example Patten himself envisages the composition of the service changing over a period of 10 years.

In conclusion I want to say this about the RUC. In their planning and preparation for change the RUC have shown the same professionalism they have shown throughout 30 years of dealing with terrorism. They have accepted the need for change in good faith and have set about achieving it.

They deserve our gratitude and our unfailing support. They have mine.

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I want also to pay tribute to the role of the Army in supporting the police in the fight against terrorism. They too have shown enormous courage in helping the police to uphold law and order and in protecting all sides of the community in North Ireland from violence. They too have paid a heavy price, with the loss of 655 soldiers since 1969.

Let me, today, express my sympathy to the families and colleagues of the soldiers lost in the tragic accident on the River Foyle last night.

Those who care about the police must resist all temptation to project self-interested political arguments onto the RUC. Whether in support or condemnation, it does them a disservice and it makes their job harder, as the Chairman of the Police Federation reiterated this morning.

To unionists I would say: you are not being asked to relinquish your pride in or your sense of community with the RUC. You are being asked to share it.

And to nationalists I say: you must meet them half way. We can create a service of which you can feel ownership. But it is up to you to embrace it.

Our success in achieving this balance will be the litmus test of these reforms.

This is an ambitious programme of change. The RUC has risen positively to that challenge and we must follow the example that they have set. We have a framework and the commitment to create a modern, effective police service, drawing support from – and putting down roots in – all parts of the community.

That is the prize. Now we must grasp it.

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