

SPEECH BY MINISTER OF HOME AFFAIRSHOUSE OF COMMONS16th October, 1968

In introducing the Notice of Motion tabled in the names of my Rt. Hon. Friends and myself I consider that the first, and main, duty falling on me is to put the unfortunate events of Saturday week past in Londonderry in their true perspective.

None of the news media, either in written reports or visually, presented a strictly chronological, accurate account of what happened, and why. The result of this was that the people of Northern Ireland and further afield, were given the impression that the R.U.C. in carrying out the terms of the Order which I had made, acted precipitately and with scant regard to that high standard of behaviour which they had set over the years.

Here might I just say that whilst technically my order was a ban in that it did prohibit the holding of a parade or meeting in two defined areas within the City of Londonderry it was in no sense a complete veto on assembly and free speech, as it has been misunderstood to be by many. I forbade the parade and meeting only in those areas where the existence of strong opposition might well have led to riot and tumult and even, in the words of my Rt. Hon. Friend the Prime Minister, "instead of us reading about scratches and bruises, we might have been reading about fatal casualties". The rest of the City was left free and unrestricted for the marchers, including the important and central focal point of Guildhall Square. This should be clearly understood.

I now deal with the facts:-

The Civil Rights Association gave notice to the police last month that they intended to hold a parade in Londonderry, which would start in the Waterside Ward, proceed through various streets in that Ward, across the Craigavon Bridge and thence via Abercorn Road and Bishop Street to the

/Diamond,

Diamond, where a meeting would be held. The police firmly believed that such a parade over the route proposed would lead to serious public disorder, as intense resentment had been engendered amongst the loyalist population of the City and, in consequence of this belief, advised me that I should ban any procession or meeting within the Waterside Ward or the Walls of the Ancient City. This, in the interests of law and order, I considered it my duty to do.

It may be asked why did this procession give rise to the resentment which it undoubtedly did? Well, as all Hon. Members of this House know, there are, not only in Londonderry but throughout Northern Ireland, certain areas which are traditionally the preserve of the loyalists and others which are the preserve of those who are opposed to the constitution. Each side recognises the claims of the other and, in the City of Londonderry, the area within the ancient city walls and the Waterside area are held to be loyalist areas. But why should this custom affect the Civil Rights Association which, on the face of it and by virtue of its own claims, is non-political and non-sectarian? Let us look at the actual composition of this body - it is an "omnium gatherum" made up of members of the Londonderry Housing Action Committee, the majority of whom are also members of the Connolly Association, of the Republican Party which includes well-known members of the I.R.A. and Sinn Fein, of the Young Socialists and of the Communist Party. A body of this composition is obviously unacceptable to those of loyalist belief, particularly to those who are aware of the recent statement by Cathal Goulding that the I.R.A. supported and intended to infiltrate and use the Civil Rights organisations.

Thus there existed good and sufficient reason for the loyalist reaction to the proposed parade and meeting. Equally important, the area within the walls contains a busy compact shopping centre which has its peak crowds drawn from wide areas of the County on a Saturday. The police

/had

had no doubts that the proposed march represented a threat to the peace which could not be over-stated. The police urged the organisers to re-consider re-routing the procession and alter the location of the proposed public meeting, pointing out the wide range of alternatives. These representations were of no avail and as a last resort the police recommended to me that I should make an order prohibiting the procession and meeting in the two areas to which I have referred.

It has been stated by a leading clergyman in Londonderry that the police had not to intervene to keep apart two hostile mobs and the suggestion behind this statement is that there was no necessity for the restriction which was imposed on the parade. The person who said this is a resident of Londonderry but despite this I consider that the local police are in a much better position to judge the underlying feeling in the City than the person who made the statement. In imposing the restriction on the parade I accepted the recommendation of the police. Undoubtedly no attack was made on the demonstrators by any citizen but if the parade had been allowed to process in the two restricted areas the consequences would have been serious and instead of some minor injuries to those taking part in the parade and to others there would have been bloodshed. Subsequent events established that the police judgment was correct because certain elements sought and planned for riot.

I should like the House to follow closely my detailed account of the events on the day itself, because it fills in certain gaps not covered by any account which I have read, nor by any television programme which I have seen.

From about 2.30 p.m. people began to congregate outside the Waterside railway station. Women and children gathered on the footpaths and on a wall beside the station, and groups of men, some carrying banners and placards, congregated in the forecourt of the station. The minimum number of police was detailed for duty in the streets and a force was held

/in reserve

in reserve at Waterside and Victoria police stations.

At about 3.15 p.m. the County Inspector in charge announced over the loud hailer the terms of my Order prohibiting parades and meetings on that day in the two areas specified and that the police would enforce the terms of the Order. He defined the areas governed by the Order and made it clear that outside these the marchers could parade and hold their meeting. The County Inspector also urged that those who were unconnected with ^{the} parade, especially women and children, should go home. This announcement was repeated some eight minutes later, when the procession was marshalled.

Soon after 3.30 p.m. the procession moved off, but was halted by the organisers to await the arrival of a bus load of persons from Belfast and then moved off again. It made its way, contrary to the originally proposed route as notified to the police, along Duke Street towards Craigavon Bridge. Duke Street was within the prohibited area.

Accordingly, police were moved from other points to the Craigavon Bridge end of Duke Street to halt the procession, and by 4.00 p.m. police vehicles had been placed across Duke Street, and a cordon of police formed between these vehicles and the marchers who had halted and gathered round a makeshift platform, from which a woman was speaking to them. Five other speakers also addressed this impromptu meeting.

I draw particular attention to this, because, in a commendable effort to avoid a conflict, the police at this stage took no action to break up the meeting or to disperse the crowd though it contravened the law. They simply halted the procession.

That the marchers did, in fact, hold a meeting lasting some 30 minutes and were addressed by some half-a-dozen speakers is something which is not appreciated. The impression given was that the march started off, reached Duke Street, and immediately the police used physical force to disperse it. This is just not so.

/At the

At the conclusion of the meeting, in fairness, I am bound to state that the chief marshal told the crowd that the meeting was over, their objective achieved and that they should go home and not resort to violence. This sound advice was repeated by one of the earlier speakers.

Unfortunately, cheering and booing broke out and placard poles, some of them broken, and a barrage of stones were hurled at the police, who endured this fusillade of various missiles for some two minutes before batons were drawn and they moved in with the help of water wagons to disperse the hostile demonstrators, who had received, not provocation from the police, but a tolerance which some members of this House may feel was undeserved. It should be clear at this point that elements in the procession desired to provoke disorder. How much easier it would have been for them if they had been allowed to penetrate areas hostile to them.

Perhaps I might here deal conveniently with the question of police brutality, which has received such widespread publicity. As I have indicated, the police did not act precipitately, but gave the marchers considerable latitude and endured physical attack before employing force. Much has been said and written about the injuries inflicted, but from enquiries which were made from the Hospitals Authority, I find that the injuries suffered by civilians were slight and superficial and certainly not of a gravity which one would expect to find had the police behaved in the manner attributed to them by their detractors. Following my announcement the member for West Tyrone made a public announcement of statements contained in a letter to me which reads as follows

I requested the police to have the matter investigated and it was arranged for H.M. Bennett, M.B., F.R.C.S., a consultant surgeon, who wrote as follows to D.I. McGimpsey of the R.U.C.

Certainly in this incident there is no evidence to support charges of police brutality.

The member for Dock also received an injury which he has taken good

/care

care to make much of and I feel I must refer to it albeit in a restricted fashion because of possible proceedings in the courts. The injury was received before riot conditions occurred, in fact before the unlawful meeting commenced. It was received when he and some placard bearers attempted to force their way through the police cordon. The procession came to a halt. Mr. Fitt was arrested for disorderly behaviour and immediately removed from the scene and neither witnessed nor took part in subsequent events. The police are satisfied that they did not cause Mr. Fitt head injury. The medical facts speak for themselves, and I prefer to leave it at that rather than indulge in further arguments, other than to add that, even of the minor injuries, many were caused by stones, flying glass and other missiles and not by police batons. A number of police were injured, none seriously I'm glad to say, and most of them have now resumed duty.

I feel sure the House would want me to congratulate the R.U.C. on the manner in which they discharged a most difficult task in most trying circumstances.

My Order has been represented as a ban on free speech and on free assembly. As a member of a democratic government I deny this; I did but discharge my primary duty of preserving law and order in forbidding these marchers from parading and meeting in areas where their presence would have led to riot and civil commotion. This duty I firmly discharged, with the support of my Rt. Hon. Colleagues, and I would hope that I would have the support of all members of this House in what is not an easy or pleasant task.

~~Finally,~~ To revert to the terms of the Motion before the House, I would deplore in the strongest terms the conduct and attitude of those who, despite warnings and advice, took part in the illegal march. I am sure the House concurs with me in this expression of condemnation.

That persons from outside, some occupying responsible positions and who

/should

should know better, should have intervened and, in fact, should have defied the law by marching, added to the burden on the authorities. They would have been better employed in setting an example to others of compliance with the law rather than by making more difficult the task of those seeking to preserve the peace.

It has been clear for some time that a variety of elements were anxious to create riot and disorder in our community and for the most part these elements have the common bond of intent to overthrow the constitution of Northern Ireland. It is about two years ago when the I.R.A. began to work to bring about unrest and disorder which they openly state as a necessary prerequisite for their physical force programme. The Republican Club movement was an attempt to create an organisation of their own for agitation. This effort: as you know was blocked but their efforts were intensified to make use of and to infiltrate other organisations for this purpose. The declaration of I.R.A. policy which I read to this House last June was intended to warn, particularly the Nationalist and Republican community, of the dangers that lay ahead in the hope that they would be just as anxious as the Government to prevent another I.R.A. campaign. Cathal Goulding, a senior I.R.A. officer, in a filmed interview with Ulster Television made it abundantly clear that I.R.A. policy had not been halted or altered and I here quote from him - "We are determined that there won't be any military campaign until we believe that the people of Ireland want this military campaign, in other words, when they have gone so far politically and otherwise that they want and are quite willing to support a military campaign then we'll have a military campaign". I believe the Londonderry disorder has brought the guns a step nearer. Mr. Eamon McCann, a principal organiser, in the Londonderry riot, speaking in Dublin on 12th October as reported by the Irish Times said:- "the place for politics in Ireland is in the street - what took place in Derry was not a riot, but an uprising, and the people who marched there were not hooligans but rebels."

/I have

I have only detailed the events of the disorder at the time of the procession and meeting, the horrible chain of events which followed must not be lost sight of - petrol bombs thrown at police, constabulary buildings set on fire, a fire engine summoned on bogus mission and attacked in a most vicious manner, wilful damage to property - all something more than hooligans on a wild spree. Magnificent police work not only brought it under control but prevented much worse from happening. There is much to think about, for instance someone decided it would be wise to dump and destroy a substantial quantity of explosive not far from Londonderry - 26 2 oz. sticks of gelignite, 26 4 oz. sticks of gelignite, 40 4 oz. sticks of plaster gelatine about 500 detonators and 500 fire igniters, were found and I cannot at this stage be more explicit because though in dangerous condition those who found it are suspected of having ideas for using it. Fortunately for the public and for the finders the police moved in. Of the other elements involved perhaps it is worth mentioning the Irish Workers Group which is a revolutionary Socialist Group which aims to mobilise the Irish section of the international working class to overthrow the existing Irish bourgeois states, destroy all remaining imperialist organs of political and economic control and establish an All-Ireland Socialist Workers Republic. The leader is Gerard Richard Lawless of 22 Duncan Street, London, a former member of the I.R.A. who was interned by the Government of the Irish Republic in 1957. Eamon McCann of 10 Gaston Square, Londonderry, a prominent participant in the unlawful procession is Chairman of the Irish Workers Group in Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland membership includes Mr. Rory McShane of 14 Upper Crescent, Belfast, who was prominent in the formation of the so-called Queen's University Republican Club.

The Nationalist and Republican Parties have in my view to carry a major share of the blame for this movement towards violence. Perhaps the real reason for their absence today is because they know they are guilty. The member for East Tyrone's speeches and actions over quite a long period now have been an incitement to unlawful activity and civil disobedience. His Party have not rebuked ^{him} / or disassociated themselves ^{from his views} / indeed a resolution / or

indeed a resolution pertaining to the matter at their Party Conference this year was conveniently shelved. There is a revealing contrast to be made between their current postures and the vociferous proclamations made at the time of the Paisley disturbances. It is a Party depending on a sense of grievance completely lacking in positive policies for the advancement of the country or even the people they purport to represent. The smear denigration and agitation tactics which they have so readily adopted are weapons of destruction. Likewise for the member^{for} Dock, he has been most irresponsible and provocative as this House well knows and to which attention has been drawn on a number of occasions with little effect. At Dungannon, whenever the marshals and organisers of the civil rights procession with the help of the police restrained the crowd, Mr. Fitt proclaimed from the platform, if it were not for the presence of women and children he would lead the demonstrators to break the law and by a flamboyant provocative speech almost achieved the objective without having to do any leading. In time his part in Londonderry will be known.

All this has got to stop, there is not the slightest excuse for such activity. The police served the community well at Londonderry. The Government intend to see that the rule of law prevails and political advantage or disadvantage or any form of embarrassment, intimidation or threat shall not deter. A law abiding community is a necessary base to sustain and expand the great social and economic advance that Northern Ireland is enjoying.
