

PROCESSIONS

In August last an order was made under the Public Order Act prohibiting for six months the holding of processions in Northern Ireland.

This order runs out on 8 February 1972.

As I mentioned at our last Cabinet the question now arises of the policy to be followed in present circumstances.

The existing ban was imposed to lessen the demands on the security forces, in protecting those taking part in processions and in dealing with the riot or near riot conditions that processions could at times and in places precipitate. This when the ban was imposed was of particular importance in view of the escalation of violence by the IRA at that time and the additional duties likely to arise on internment.

While internment is weakening the IRA and, in the view of the Army, must be continued with unabated vigour if the terrorists are to be defeated, the level of violence is still very high. So high, in fact, that it would be quite unreasonable to divert the security forces from what must now be their prime objective - the defeat of the IRA - or impose any additional or potential burden on them.

While many processions attract little or no attention there are a considerable number that arouse criticism, are provocative or are likely to lead to trouble. In the extreme case those taking part can easily be attacked, perhaps with fatal results. The attendance of security forces for duty at processions can make them easy targets for assassins.

In recent weeks we have seen what could well be the beginning of a series of processions organised by Civil Rights and other "front" organisations of the IRA, which could increase in number and enter 'flashpoint' areas.

Although the existing ban has created difficulties in its enforcement on two recent occasions the consequences of not continuing it or of continuing it with modifications are in the views of the Army much more serious. The absence of a ban with a plethora of processions would in their view place an intolerable burden on the security forces, partly in the multiplicity of security commitments and partly in the consequential escalation of violence. If there were no general prohibition all processions would have to be considered and many prohibited on security grounds.

In the circumstances the Joint Security Committee recommends that the present policy be continued for a further period, which should it is felt be for twelve months, but kept under review in the light of changes in the security position. If this is agreed an early announcement should be made in the interest of the organisers of the various processions.

Consideration was given to allowing processions on a limited number of days partly to provide traditional safety valves and partly to maintain continuity but the Committee is satisfied that it would not be justified in asking the security forces to assist in this and feels that the Government would have no answer to opinion both inside and outside Northern Ireland if any permitted procession ended in rioting. We must it is felt concentrate our efforts on defeating the IRA and not be diverted from this for partial relief from criticism. Any course of action will of course be criticised.

If we agree to ban we must be assured that all reasonable steps will be taken to make the ban effective. To this end I have had the action taken on 25 December in relation to the Long Kesh procession and on 3 January in relation to the Falls Park demonstration examined and the directions issued by their commanding officers to police and Army reviewed and revised as necessary.

While it may be expected that breaches of the ban will be dealt with in the majority of cases in a similar manner to offences under other branches of the law, ie by the prosecution of identifiable offenders, the strengthening of enforcement procedures which will now take place may result in procession routes being closed entirely and

not even allow anyone to continue on the pavements (as was done recently) or in the case of multiple converging processions to get to the place of the demonstration; On the spot arrest of ringleaders may well include persons well known in the community such as members of Parliament.

Some discretion must however be allowed to officers on the spot, particularly where women and children are put in the front as a shield or processions are confined in the main to difficult and non-flashpoint areas. It may well be at times that a generally firmer line will precipitate violence in what might otherwise be a non-violent situation and anti-riot measures may be required. This should now be recognised.

As the prohibition on processions will be made under the Public Order Act, offences against the order will attract a mandatory sentence of six months imprisonment.

If my colleagues agree with this proposal I will bring it to a meeting of the parliamentary party and inform the leaders of the organisations of traditional processions.

It will be recollected that the 12th July processions did not take place during the war years. The case for following this practice is stronger today than then.