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PROPOSED STATEMENT ON CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE BY THE HEAD OF THE DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING,
LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND PLANNING FOR CONSIDERATION BY THE EXECUTIVE ON TUESDAY 2 APRIL 74

I wish today to make a statement about Civil Disobedience and to address my remarks particularly to those who are still taking part in the Civil Disobedience Campaign.

Members will recall that the Rent and Rates Strike was called in the most difficult circumstances in 1971 and had a two-fold purpose - the withdrawal of consent from existing institutions and as a protest against the re-introduction of internment.

Members may also recall that in a statement issued on 28 December last by the SDLP Assembly Party and the Party Executive those involved in the Civil Disobedience Campaign were asked to end their participation. My presence at this Despatch Box today as a representative of Partnership Government in this community is eloquent testimony to the extent to which things have changed in Northern Ireland, since the Civil Disobedience Campaign was launched. It clearly would be inconsistent with my participation and that of my colleagues in this administration if we did not ask all of the people to participate as well.

On the internment issue the Sunningdale Agreement contained a commitment from the British Government to phase out internment. That commitment has again been given by the Secretary of State on behalf of the new British Government. I and my colleagues are convinced that this commitment will be honoured and in these circumstances there is no justification for a continuation of the Civil Disobedience Campaign.

In any case the Civil Disobedience Campaign has to a considerable extent already evaporated. At its height in August 1971, some 26,000 tenants were involved. The most up-to-date figures show that just over 11,000 tenants are now involved.

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I accept that there are people who sincerely disagree, for reasons of principle, with me and my colleagues on the termination of the Civil Disobedience Campaign. They are entitled to those opinions as we are entitled to ours. I now ask those people to reconsider their attitude; to take into account the commitment on internment and to take into account all of the other changes which have taken place in this community over the last few months. I also ask them to bear in mind what I have honestly described as "a Housing Crisis in many areas of Northern Ireland" and to consider the impact which the continuation of the Civil Disobedience Campaign could have on the capability of the Housing Executive and my Department to tackle this crisis.

But there are others on strike who do not care two figs about principle, who have seized the excuse not to pay their debts. Some of these people are on more than Rent and Rates Strike and if internment did not exist would find some other excuse for refusing to pay their way.

Nevertheless, it is my intention to deal compassionately and justly with all. I am determined that no hardship will be caused to anyone. The Housing Executive has already offered reasonable terms to those on strike. Those who can afford it should repay immediately. Those who cannot afford it will be allowed to do so over a reasonable period of time.

But I must make it clear that payment in full will be required. There cannot be an Amnesty. Arrears must be paid. Any other decision would be unfair to the great majority of tenants who have paid their rents and indeed, to those who have had deductions made from Social Security Benefits.

I have stated that the Civil Disobedience Campaign should now end; that all arrears must be repaid and that everything possible will be done to ensure that hardship will not be caused to anyone.

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However, I must also face the possibility that a small number of people will not heed my advice and for reasons of their own, some political, some personal, will continue to refuse to pay. I must bluntly warn these people and those who would seek to use them for their own ends that new measures are being introduced to ensure that all arrears are paid. Let no-one be in any doubt about the determination of my colleagues and myself in this matter.

First, an increase has been authorised in the amounts which can be allocated from Social Security Benefits by the Department of Health and Social Services to meet arrears of rent. The rates of benefit were increased in October 1972 and again in October 1973. Members will be aware that benefit increases were promised in the recent budget to be payable in July next. Allocations also will therefore be increased in order to maintain their size in relation to benefits. The rates of allocation will be as follows:-

Man 60p
Wife 40p
Child 20p
Family Maximum £2.00

The previous allocations were:-

Man 50p
Wife 30p
Child 15p
Family Maximum £1.50

Secondly, by the terms of an Order made under the Payments for Debt (Emergency Provision) Act 1971 each debtor on the books of the Benefit Allocation Branch of the Department

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of Health and Social Services will have to pay a collection charge at the rate of 25p per week. A similar charge will be made in any other case where allocations are made out of payments from public funds. The money raised by these charges will help to offset the cost of the allocation system. These measures will be introduced on 20 May next. I hope that as many people as possible will respond to this announcement and make their settlements with public bodies before then. I wish to emphasise that these changes should not cause any hardship as they are in line with increases in benefits.

It is my hope that people will settle and not become involved in these new measures; that all of those on Rent and Rates Strike will recognise that the new institutions created provide the basis for a fair and just society. As one of those involved in launching the Civil Disobedience Campaign on internment day 1971, it is now a measure of my confidence in the new institutions that I so strongly urge the ending of it.

J AUSTIN CURRIE
Head of Department of Housing,
LG and Planning

1 April 1974

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