

*Mr Spence*



## NORTHERN IRELAND Information Service

4 March 1986

### STATEMENT TODAY IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS BY RT HON TOM KING MP, SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

As the House will be aware, the leaders of the two main Unionist parties had called for a day of action and protest. They invited everybody to stay away from work and stated that it was to be a passive and voluntary demonstration and that there should be no roadblocks or intimidation of those going to work.

In the event, there was widespread obstruction, intimidation and some violence during the day culminating in serious disorder in East and North Belfast last night. The first incidents occurred before midnight on Sunday and disturbances continued until the early hours of this morning.

In spite of these difficulties a very considerable number of people succeeded in getting to work; particularly in the commercial offices and public services, but many factories were seriously affected.

I pay tribute to the determination of all those who refused to be intimidated and exercised their right to go to work. I also pay tribute to the men of the security forces and particularly the RUC for all the work that they did to seek to keep roads open for people to be able to get to work. However there have also been a number of complaints when it is alleged that the police did not take action when it was required. The Chief Constable is preparing a full report on all the policing aspects of the past 24 hours. To give the House some indication of the scale of the workload that the RUC faced, on the latest information available there were some 655 roadblocks in the Province over the period of which 441 were cleared. There were in addition some 80 cavalcades and demonstrations, which caused considerable disruption in a number of towns mainly around midday. There were 57 arrests and the names of 184 people noted to proceed by way of summons. Sixty-five plastic baton rounds were fired, 47 policemen were injured. Last night there were a number of petrol bombs thrown, and there were over 20 shots fired in 3 firearms attacks on the police during the disturbances in the loyalist areas.

The figures listed above give the details of a tragic day for Northern Ireland. Many Members will have seen some of the disgraceful incidents on television last night. These pictures have been shown all over the world and will do great damage to the reputation of the Province. The House will also have seen elected Members of this House making common cause with people in paramilitary dress.

The Government is well aware of the strength of feeling among many Unionists about aspects of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. The House will be aware that My Right Honourable Friend the Prime Minister and I met the Right Honourable Member for Lagan Valley and the Member for North Antrim last Tuesday. During a long meeting My Right Honourable Friend put forward a number of proposals to help meet their main concerns and agreed to consider positively their suggestions that the Government should call a Round Table Conference to discuss devolution in Northern Ireland; it was agreed that we would all reflect on the various suggestions that had been made and would meet again shortly. The prospects of constructive discussions instead of confrontation were greeted with widespread relief in the Province, only for that to be destroyed by their abrupt repudiation of this course following a meeting in Belfast late that night. They then decided to proceed with the day of protest.

The whole country can now see how tragic and totally counterproductive yesterday's action has been. It is now urgent that the Unionist leaders recognise again that the only way in which the concerns of those they seek to represent can be addressed, is by constructive discussion and not by threats and violence. The degree of intimidation evident yesterday showed how little confidence many of the organisers had in being able peacefully to persuade their fellow citizens to join their day of protest. I make it quite clear that this Government, this Parliament will not be intimidated either by the sort of violent actions that took place yesterday. I believe that an increasing number of Unionists, while disliking many aspects of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, wish to look for a constructive way forward. The Government has made quite clear our willingness to sit down and discuss seriously the Unionists concerns. In our Parliamentary democracy, in this United Kingdom, that can be the only way.