

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

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PRIME MINISTER'S STATEMENT

THE EVENTS OF 30TH JANUARY 1972

29TH JANUARY 1998

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STATEMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER

EVENTS OF 30 JANUARY 1972

With permission, Madam Speaker, I will make a Statement on the events in Northern Ireland on 30 January 1972, which has become known as Bloody Sunday.

The facts that are undisputed are well-known. On 30 January 1972, during a disturbance in Londonderry following a civil rights march, shots were fired by the British Army. 13 people were killed, and another 13 were wounded, one of whom subsequently died. The day after the incident the then Prime Minister set up a public inquiry under the then Lord Chief Justice, Lord Widgery.

He produced a report within 11 weeks of the day. His conclusions included these: that shots had been fired at the soldiers before they started the firing which led to the casualties; that for the most part the soldiers acted as they did because they thought their standing

orders required it; and that whilst there was no proof that any of the deceased had been shot whilst handling a firearm or bomb, there was a strong suspicion that some had been firing weapons or handling bombs in the course of the afternoon.

The time scale within which Lord Widgery produced his report meant that he was not able to consider all the evidence which might have been available. For example, he did not receive any evidence from the wounded who were still in hospital, and he did not consider individually substantial numbers of eye-witness accounts provided to his Inquiry in the early part of March 1972.

Since his report was published, much new material has come to light about the events of that day. This material includes new eye-witness accounts, new ballistic material, and new medical evidence.

In 1992 the then Prime Minister said in a letter to the HM for Foyle, who has campaigned tirelessly on this issue, that those shot should be regarded as innocent of any allegation that they were shot whilst handling firearms or explosives. I reaffirm that today.

Last year the families of those killed provided the previous Government with a new dossier on the events of Bloody Sunday. The Irish Government also sent the Government a detailed assessment which analysed the new material and Lord Widgery's findings in the light of all material available.

I want to place on record our strongest admiration for the way in which our security forces have responded over the years to terrorism in Northern Ireland. They set an example to the world of restraint combined with effectiveness given the dangerous circumstances in which they are called on to operate. Young men and women daily risk their lives protecting the lives of others and upholding the rule of law, carrying out a task which we have laid upon them. Lessons have of course been learned over many years – in some cases painful lessons. But the support of the Government and this House for our Armed Forces has been and remains unshakeable.

There have been many victims of violence in Northern Ireland before and since Bloody Sunday. More than 3,000 people, civilians as well as soldiers, policemen and prison officers, have lost their

lives in the last 26 years. It may be asked why we should pay such attention to one event.

Madam Speaker, we do not forget or ignore all the other attacks, all the innocent deaths, all the victims of bloody terrorism. Sir Kenneth Bloomfield, a former Permanent Secretary in Northern Ireland, is currently looking at a suitable way to commemorate the victims of violence. In particular, the sacrifice of those many members of the security forces, including the RUC, who lost their lives doing their duty will never be forgotten by this Government, just as they were not forgotten by the last Government. The pain of those left behind is no less than the pain of the relatives of the victims of Bloody Sunday.

But Bloody Sunday was different because, where the State's own authorities are concerned, we must be as sure as we can of the truth, precisely because we do pride ourselves on our democracy and our respect for the law, and on the professionalism and dedication of our security forces.

Madam Speaker, this is a very difficult issue. I have re-read Lord Widgery's report myself and looked at the new material. I have consulted with my colleagues most closely concerned. We have considered very carefully whether it is appropriate now to have a fresh Inquiry into the events of Bloody Sunday.

I should emphasise that such a new Inquiry can only be justified if an objective examination of the material now available gives grounds for believing that the events of that day should be looked at afresh, and the conclusions of Lord Widgery re-examined. I have been strongly advised that there are indeed grounds for such a further Inquiry. We believe that the weight of material now available is such that these events require re-examination. We believe that the only course which will lead to there being public confidence in the results of any further investigation is for a full-scale judicial inquiry into Bloody Sunday to be set up.

We have therefore decided to set up an Inquiry under the Tribunal of Inquiry (Evidence) Act 1921. The Inquiry will have the power to call witnesses and obtain production of papers.

As required by the Act a Resolution will be required to set up the Inquiry. The Resolution will be tabled later today in my name, and will be in the following terms:

That it is expedient that a Tribunal be established for inquiring into a definite matter of urgent public importance, namely the events on Sunday, 30 January 1972 which led to loss of life in connection with the procession in Londonderry on that day, taking account of any new information relevant to events on that day.

Lord Saville of Newdigate, a Law Lord, has agreed to chair a Tribunal of three. The other two members are likely to be from the Commonwealth.

It is not possible to say now exactly how long the Inquiry will take but it should be allowed the time necessary to cover all the evidence now available thoroughly and completely. It is for the Tribunal to decide how far its proceedings will be open, but the Act requires them to be held in public unless there are special countervailing considerations. The hearings are likely to be partly here and partly

in Northern Ireland, but again this is largely for the Tribunal. Questions of immunity from prosecution for those giving evidence to the Inquiry will be for the Tribunal to consider in individual cases, and to refer to the Attorney General as necessary. It will report its conclusions to my RHF the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. Our intention is that they will be made public.

Madam Speaker, let me make clear that the aim of the Inquiry is not to accuse individuals or institutions or invite fresh recriminations but to establish the truth about what happened on that day, so far as that can be achieved at 26 years distance. This will not be easy, and we are all well aware that there were particularly difficult circumstances in Northern Ireland at that time.

Bloody Sunday was a tragic day for all concerned. We must all wish it had never happened. Our concern now is simply to establish the truth, and close this painful chapter once and for all.

Madam Speaker, members of the families of the victims, like the HM for Foyle, have conducted a long campaign to this end. I have heard some of their remarks over recent years and have been struck

by their dignity. Most do not want recrimination. They do not want revenge. But they do want the truth. I believe that it is in the interests of everyone that the truth is established, and told. It is also the way forward to the necessary reconciliation which will be such an important part of building a secure future for the people of Northern Ireland. I ask all sides of the House to support our proposal for this Inquiry.