

speeches
by others?

Enclosed: Full text of Secretary of State's speech to the House of
Commons on Thursday 5 July



With the Compliments

of

John McConnell

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Northern Ireland Office
Stormont Castle
Belfast BT4 3ST

I beg to move,

That the draft Northern Ireland Act 1974 (Interim Period Extension) Order 1989, which was laid before the House on 20 June be approved.

Mr Speaker, this draft Order renews the temporary Provisions in the Northern Ireland Act 1974, under which government by Direct Rule continues in Northern Ireland. In presenting the draft Order to the House, I owe the House both an account of the Government's stewardship in Northern Ireland over the last year, and an assessment of the prospects that these temporary arrangements can be set aside in favour of more permanent arrangements for the government of Northern Ireland.

As regards the Government's stewardship, our overriding aim is to provide good government for Northern Ireland. Given the challenges it faces, that requires a combination of policies designed to bring peace, stability and prosperity.

As we know only too well, peace in Northern Ireland is still threatened by terrorism. By no means all of this comes from the Republican side. But the principal threat to peace comes from the Provisional IRA. It is difficult to see any kind of logic in the dreadful atrocities, claimed (as though there was pride in the ownership of murder) by the Provisionals. But we must presume, from statements made on their behalf, that they believe that the continuation of the policy of killing and maiming will lead this Government, or some future British Government, to "withdraw", or agree to withdraw from Northern Ireland. If they do think this, they are wholly mistaken. No British Government - and here I am sure that I speak also for the parties in Opposition - will respond to terrorism in that craven way. And, if, for once, I can presume to speak for the Unionist population

in Northern Ireland, the Provisionals are mistaken also if they believe that bombing and shooting will change the determination of Unionist people to remain British. The Provisional's campaign is, therefore, not only vicious and depraved, it is also tragic because it is futile. It will not have its intended effect.

It will continue to be the first priority of Government to eradicate terrorism in Northern Ireland - from whichever side of the community it comes. All our policies for Northern Ireland are intended to contribute to, or be consistent with, that objective; but effective action by the security forces against terrorists will continue to be the key factor. The police and the Army know that they have the wholehearted support of Government as they courageously carry out what is, every day of the week, an enormously difficult and dangerous task. The whole House will wish to join me in paying tribute to their courage and determination. We intend to ensure that the security forces have the necessary resources - both physical and legal - for their essential work. Terrorism will continue to be dealt with by firm and effective action within the law. We remain ready to strengthen this further if necessary. We shall shortly be looking at Lord Colville's review of existing anti-terrorist legislation as a preliminary to bringing forward legislation to replace the present Emergency Provisions Acts before they expire in 1992. Where there is a demonstrable need for new powers, I shall not hesitate to ask this House to approve them.

Despite the efforts of the terrorists to bomb jobs away, the Northern Ireland economy has been growing strongly over the last 7-8 years and is continuing to improve this year. Visitors to the Province will see immediately the changes in Belfast and Londonderry - the new spirit of economic optimism following the privatisation of Shorts and Harland and Wolff. We have been frank about the Northern Ireland economy's structural weaknesses in our new economic development strategy, 'Competing in the 1990s'. We have set out there our belief that, if Northern Ireland is to make its way in the Europe of the Single Market,

its industry must become more competitive, its labour force more skilled, its culture more imbued with the spirit of enterprise. This will require much effort on the part of individuals and the private sector; though Government will help, the drive must come from outside. I am happy to say that, in the last year, there have been many hopeful signs of Northern Ireland's ability to bring off such a transformation in its economy. Unemployment is at its lowest point for over six years, though at 14% it is not any sense at an acceptable level. In the last year or so we have attracted new industrial investors from France, USA, Germany, Hong Kong, Norway, Korea, GB and Japan. There are about 2500 people employed in Japanese manufacturing companies in Northern Ireland which compares very reasonably with the 3300 in Japanese companies in Scotland. The increase in inward investment looks set to continue. Increasing job opportunities for all and improving living standards are a crucial ingredient to restoring social harmony and self-confidence, and reducing deprivation and communal division.

In the social field, our aim is, through fair and effective government, to tackle the underlying problems of division and disadvantage in Northern Ireland. We have shown through the introduction of stronger legislation, which came into force on 1 January this year, our determination to ensure fair employment. We shall be studying closely the recommendations of the recent report of the Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights on discrimination. We have taken a number of measures, including the Making Belfast Work initiative, designed to achieve real and lasting improvement in conditions in the most disadvantaged areas. The Springvale initiative provides a further example. We are addressing with renewed vigour and, I believe, success the underlying community relations problems through encouraging greater cross-community relations and co-operation and fostering respect for the different cultural traditions.

As I said at the beginning of my remarks, our aim is to provide

the best possible Government for all the people of Northern Ireland. We can, I believe, justifiably claim that we have had some success in this task. But we are governing via the artificial mechanism of Direct Rule, under constitutional arrangements which are avowedly temporary, and which no one would dream of inventing as a long-term way of governing any sizeable community. Even if we are, in practice, getting most things right - and that is for others to judge - we are doing so in the knowledge that, as Ministers, we are not directly accountable to the people of Northern Ireland. As it seems to me, and to my Ministerial colleagues, we have a moral duty to seek to find ways of returning substantial responsibilities to politicians who are elected by the people of Northern Ireland and who will be accountable to them for their stewardship of Northern Ireland affairs. But before I turn to the efforts which I have been making to address that issue, I wish to deal briefly with a broader constitutional issue.

Although the constitutional question has often seemed central to matters in Northern Ireland I turn to it now in the hope of putting it to one side. We regard the position as clear. Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom in national and international law. It is part of the United Kingdom because that is the clear wish of the majority of the people of Northern Ireland. There will be no change in the status of Northern Ireland unless and until a majority of the people there want it. That seems unlikely for the foreseeable future. I believe that most in this House, and I number myself among them, would wish to see the union continue, but the principles of democracy and self-determination mean that the people of Northern Ireland must themselves be the final arbiters.

By virtue of its Constitution the Republic of Ireland has since 1937 also claimed sovereignty over Northern Ireland. We do not accept or recognise that claim, which has no basis in our law or, equally important, in international law. This claim is, I know, seen by some in Northern Ireland, and indeed in other parts of

this country, as a major stumbling block to the development of constructive relationships. I do not myself regard it as helpful. Nor, however, do I believe it should be a major preoccupation - for this reason. The Republic of Ireland has accepted, through the Anglo-Irish Agreement, that the status of Northern Ireland could be changed only with the consent of a majority of its people. It has, in short, through this binding international treaty, shown that it too supports the right of the people of Northern Ireland to self-determination. The Agreement also enshrines the Irish Government's support for our policy of establishing local institutions of government on a basis which would secure widespread acceptance throughout the community.

Meanwhile, under the Direct Rule system we have now, I have found the framework for Anglo-Irish relations provided by the Agreement valuable. Both the Agreement and its working have demonstrated the desire of the two Governments to have a close and friendly relationship, and to tackle the reality of different cultural, historical and religious traditions in Northern Ireland. It has also provided a framework for co-operation on a range of practical matters: cross-border security, extradition, and North/South co-operation on economic and social matters. The need for, and the value of, a sound working relationship on such issues must, I think, be self-evident.

But there is no reason why the present Agreement should be the last word. While neither Government is seeking a new Agreement, if a better agreement, which commanded widespread support within both sides of the community in Northern Ireland, were to be arrived at, that would prove to be an important step forward.

Obviously, neither Government will abandon the Agreement except for something they regard as better. By what criteria might a new agreement be judged an improvement? I am clear that a central test will be the one I have just mentioned: namely, that it should enjoy widespread support not only within both communities in Northern Ireland, but also from the people of

Great Britain and the Republic. The second test would be that any new arrangement should address, at one and the same time, all aspects of the matter, including arrangements for the government of Northern Ireland and relations between the various parts of these islands.

I said on 9 January that any agreement between the constitutional political parties on new arrangements for exercising political power in Northern Ireland would have substantial implications for the Anglo-Irish Agreement and that both Governments would be bound to consider those implications seriously and sympathetically. The Taoiseach also made clear later that month that "if ... a new and more broadly-based agreement can be reached by direct discussions and negotiations between all the parties involved, the Irish Government would be prepared to contemplate, in agreement with the British Government, a new and better structure, agreement or arrangement, to transcend the existing one". I can confirm that, in the context of discussions about possible future arrangements for the government of Northern Ireland, we would give serious consideration to any implications for the Agreement which such arrangements might have, and we would also consider any proposal (including any proposal for an alternative to the Agreement) which would advance the underlying objectives of achieving peace, stability and reconciliation.

In this Debate a year ago my predecessor was less than fair to himself when he described political progress as being virtually non-existent. He made great efforts to explore the scope for political progress towards an accommodation which might be reflected in the re-establishment of local institutions of government. And in my own efforts to carry this process forward I have been conscious of building on the sound foundations he laid down.

There are a number of reasons for continuing this work. Quite apart from the long history of devolved government in Northern Ireland, and the need to find means of recognising Northern

Ireland's distinct local interests and needs, there are two important reasons of principle. First, the present arrangements, under which local government has only the most modest powers, while the regional government has been absorbed into the machinery of central government, mean that there is no effective vehicle for local democracy in Northern Ireland. There is a gap in democratic accountability which this House cannot contemplate with equanimity.

Without a regional political forum, elected representatives in Northern Ireland are left with little opportunity to influence the decisions of Government or to exercise powers which are available to politicians elsewhere in the United Kingdom or indeed in the Republic of Ireland. It has been said that a healthy community needs as its respiratory system a healthy and well-functioning political machine. The present weakness of local political involvement in the government of Northern Ireland is not a satisfactory long-term arrangement; and it causes a local power vacuum which terrorists and their supporters attempt to exploit to their advantage.

Second, and most crucial to the future of Northern Ireland, and for those of us who share the agonies which that community is facing, perhaps the best hope of reconciliation between the two sides of the community is to be found in the achievement and maintenance of a long lasting local political accommodation. It is the existence in Northern Ireland of the two traditions and the two identities, one of them looking, as it is free to do, to another jurisdiction to the South with which it feels cultural and other affinities, which above all distinguishes its situation from that of other parts of this country. It is this which suggests that a distinct approach is needed, whatever the constitutional arrangements made for England, Scotland or Wales. Though the constitutional position, as I have explained, is clear, the internal and external dimensions cannot be wholly separated.

I should like to report to the House that during the past year the modest, but, I hope, valuable progress made towards the goal of new, democratically accountable, political institutions. In the last few months I have had lengthy discussions with the Irish Government, with representatives of the constitutional parties in Northern Ireland, with spokesmen for other parties in the House, and indeed with a wide range of well-informed people in all parts of these islands. I have been greatly encouraged by the co-operative and constructive spirit I have encountered, and by the evident willingness to work to find a way through the difficulties. I have also been gratified by the discretion my interlocutors have shown and which I have sought to reciprocate; and for the patience of this House. It has been important to the building of confidence that such discussions must take place on a confidential basis.

Our discussions have been, for the most part, on preliminary issues: how talks might begin, how they might be organised, within what timetable and on what agenda? These matters are important, because in any talks the participants should have a clear understanding of what is involved.

But let me briefly explain the Government's own position in these matters. We wish to safeguard the constitutional guarantees which I have earlier described, and to ensure that the future of Northern Ireland is determined by the free will, without intimidation, of the people there. Second, we wish to establish arrangements for government which give full rein to the interests of all the people of Northern Ireland, and which safeguard both traditions and provide for the full expression of both identities. Our overwhelming concern is for the people of Northern Ireland, and those who think we have some other interest mistake not only our sense of responsibility for our own citizens, but also our determination to ensure that their rights, the rights of all of them, are respected and preserved.

As I have already said, we seek institutions of government in

Northern Ireland which will be directly accountable to all its people, and to which they can all give their wholehearted commitment and support. We do not pre-judge the detailed form that such political arrangements should take. The local politicians who are expected to work them must help to create them. Our broad criteria for endorsing any particular system are that it should be workable, and likely to prove stable and durable; and that it must command widespread support and provide an appropriate and fair role for both sides of the community.

The exploratory discussions I have had, especially over the last six months, have confirmed and, I believe, modestly enlarged the shared appreciation of the common ground. They may, too, have strengthened the realisation that a number of those concerned share perceptions, or at least accept others' different views and the reasons for them, to a greater extent than previously.

It seems clear that if talks are to be held they would need to embrace all the main relationships and accordingly have different strands. One strand would involve the Government and the main constitutional political parties in Northern Ireland. Its objective would be to work towards agreement on new arrangements for the government of Northern Ireland, within the UK, which might provide a basis for the transfer of political power, authority and responsibility to locally elected representatives in Northern Ireland on a basis which was widely acceptable. This strand would need to deal too with the relationship between any new institutions in Northern Ireland on the one hand and Westminster on the other. This dimension of the issue is perhaps less often mentioned, not because it is unimportant, but because we on our side are clear about it. The Irish Government, which as I have mentioned is committed by virtue of the Anglo-Irish Agreement to support our policy to transfer power to locally accountable institutions in Northern Ireland, would not be directly represented in such talks, though we would certainly wish to take account of any views and proposals which they might put forward.

It is generally agreed, too, that the process of talks and negotiation should cover the relationships between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and the implications for the relationship between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. It is also I believe common ground that such talks would need to lead to the simultaneous drawing together of the different strands. That is, no agreement on any one aspect could be reached unless and until all parties were finally satisfied with the whole of what might emerge from such a dialogue.

I detect also a significant measure of agreement on the structure such talks might have, and the role each of the potential participants might fulfil in the various stages of the process. I would not, however, wish to exaggerate the extent to which views on these matters converge.

The more immediate difficulty - though I hope the House will join with me in seeking to surmount it - is to secure agreement from all the potential participants that the conditions to start dialogue now exist. As is widely known most, if not quite all, of the potential participants to these complex and interwoven issues have preliminary preoccupations of principle, some of which appeared at first sight to be irreconcilable. Some of the potential participants frankly acknowledge these as preconditions to talking; others do not. My task has been to explore the extent to which these important preliminary points can be overcome.

It is of course the privilege and responsibility of all political representatives to express their own point of view. I cannot speak for others and I would not want it thought for a moment that I claimed to. However, I should tell the House that it is my own judgement that there does now exist, following the exploratory discussions I have held, a basis for entering talks intended to cover all the three relationships; a basis which I

believe would meet everyone's essential interests and which would allow all participants to enter talks on a basis of mutual respect without any sacrifice of important interests or essential principles. The basis would also be consistent with our international obligations, including those under the Anglo-Irish Agreement.

I should like to pay tribute to the flexibility, imagination and resolution of those with whom I have conducted discussions. Many have, I believe, shown readiness to accept the challenges which the long history of Northern Ireland provides, and to respond, with a combination of strength of purpose on behalf of principle and of the interests of those they represent, with a capacity to seek a constructive way forward. I will not disguise from the House the fact that I had hoped to be in a position by now to give some indication of when it might be possible to move to formal talks. I am in fact not yet in a position to do so. It would no doubt have been convenient to be able to give such a report today, but this debate is a function of the parliamentary timetable, and no mystic significance therefore attaches to it. The provision for direct rule will shortly expire unless renewed. The important thing is that we have been making progress and will continue to seek to do so. That can only be on the basis of careful and detailed preparation of the ground at each stage, as has been my practice to date.

As the House is fully aware, I have throughout this process been careful to express the prospects in cautious terms. I have said that talks are possible rather than probable. I have also emphasised that in the end it is a matter for the potential participants, and in particular for the political parties within Northern Ireland, to decide if and when the conditions for carrying matters forward exist. It is, above all, a matter of individual and collective political will. For my part, I will continue to work for a way forward, since it is clear to me that constructive dialogue, particularly between the representatives of the two sides of the community within Northern Ireland, is of

the greatest importance. I firmly believe that the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, and Great Britain would wish the process in which we are engaged to culminate in success. Only the terrorists resist the process, since they can have no part in it. For the views of those who use violence count for nothing while blood is their argument.

I beg to move.