

beginner - " If we can get a high level  
of acceptance "

STATEMENT BY  
THE SECRETARY OF STATE  
FOR NORTHERN IRELAND:  
THE GOVERNMENT  
OF NORTHERN IRELAND

HOUSE OF COMMONS: 2 JULY 1980

Tim Doherty - Any attempt to resume rejected executive  
rejected.

- Two level cabinet - wouldn't work.

Paisley - Greatly concerned with security.  
35 IRA murders.

→ Any new assembly - some solid role  
in security field.

- Any job so rejected that members can have  
a majority will be rejected.

1. With permission Mr Speaker, I propose to make a statement on Northern Ireland.

2. The Government has today published a Command Paper entitled "The Government of Northern Ireland - Proposals for Further Discussion". Copies are available in the Vote Office.

3. Publication of this paper is the latest stage in a process that began with the resolve expressed in the Gracious Speech to :

"seek an acceptable way of restoring to the people of Northern Ireland more control over their own affairs."

4. Last summer I held talks with the leaders of the principal political parties in Northern Ireland. And in October last I announced the Government's intention to hold a political Conference to identify the highest level of agreement on how powers might be transferred to locally elected representatives. To assist that Conference we published a Working Paper (Cmnd 7763). That Working Paper set out certain principles to which the Government believe any transfer of responsibility should conform; and it gave a number of illustrations of ways in which transferred powers might be exercised.

5. The Conference met in Belfast between January and March, and was attended by three of the four main Northern Ireland parties. It did valuable work. It identified a substantial number of issues on which very little seemed to divide the parties. It enabled the parties to describe in detail to me and to each other what their views were and the reasons for them. And it explored very fully the key questions which still have to be resolved if we are to establish any kind of acceptable local administration in Northern Ireland.

In addition, we have had the benefit of submissions and views expressed by parties and individuals not represented at the Conference, including the paper submitted to the Prime Minister by the Ulster Unionist Party.

6. The document published today has two principal aims.

7. First, it describes those areas where it is now possible to see fairly clearly how powers might be transferred. For example, there is a clear desire for the transfer of both legislative and executive powers over a range of subjects similar to that transferred in 1973; and for the establishment of a single elected Assembly for Northern Ireland with about 80 members. As was made clear in the Working Paper the Government at Westminster would need to continue to be responsible for certain functions, especially law and order and the determination of Northern Ireland's share of the total of public expenditure; and some arrangements would be needed whereby elected representatives were able to give advice to the Secretary of State on the exercise of those functions.

8. Second, the document analyses and puts forward for discussion proposals on those aspects where, as is well known, there is disagreement between the parties, namely, how the executive powers of government in Northern Ireland are to be exercised so as to "take account of the interests of both parts of the community", as the principles in the Working Paper put it.

9. On the one hand, some wish to see the Executive formed by the leader of the party or parties commanding a simple majority in the Assembly. On the other, some believe that an adequate role for representatives of the minority community could only be assured if executive powers are exercised by a more broadly-based body.

10. It is clear that further discussion and negotiation is needed in Northern Ireland on this issue; and the Government has set out in the White Paper specific proposals, on two somewhat different approaches, as a basis for further talks with and between the parties.

11. I do not need to tell the House the importance of this subject to the people of Northern Ireland and to the people of the United Kingdom as a whole. For that reason I ask, and I believe that the House would expect, that all concerned study this document with great care. I do not intend this afternoon to summarise the content of the document. It deserves more extended consideration, and my Rt Hon Friend, the Leader of the House, has already promised an early debate, when I look forward to hearing the considered views of Hon Members.

12. Following that debate, I and my colleagues will be discussing the proposals as widely as possible in Northern Ireland. I hope also to embark upon bilateral discussions with the Northern Ireland parties, and I shall of course welcome any views or ideas they may put forward for our consideration.

13. I envisage these talks taking place in confidence and, to begin with at least, with the parties separately. It is not my intention for the time being to reconvene the Conference.

14. For my part I approach these talks determined to make progress. I must emphasise that to make progress a constructive approach is needed from the people of Northern Ireland and their political representatives. It is my hope to complete this further stage by the end of the summer recess. The Government can then reach its own conclusions on what proposals it would be appropriate to put before the House.

15. The document published today refers to the need for peace and stability in Northern Ireland as a basis for economic reconstruction. The present economic situation in the Province is a telling reminder of how urgent that task is and how desirable it is for the elected representatives of Northern Ireland to be directly involved in it.

16. I would say one final thing. The House will be aware, Mr Speaker, that the men of criminal violence will, if they can, disrupt the progress of political discussion and reconciliation; and Hon Members on all sides will, I hope, join with me in appealing to the people of Northern Ireland to support the security forces who are committed against terrorism, so that these further discussions about their future can take place quietly and with confidence.