

*L.H. Powell 6/1*

EXTRACT from speech by the Rt Hon. J. Enoch Powell, MP to the Annual general meeting of the East Down Unionist Association Downpatrick, Co. Down, 8 pm. Saturday 3 January, 1980.

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New Year is a good time for looking over unfinished business. There is one piece of unfinished business in Northern Ireland which needs to be taken in hand firmly and urgently. By the test of whether the Government does so or not, its good faith and sincerity will stand to be judged.

The Northern Ireland Office claims that it has successfully resisted the demand for political status - special category - in the prisons of the province and that it defeated, without concession, the attempt to force its hand by the hunger strike. There are those of us who doubt that claim and believe that it was only in the nick of time that the Northern Ireland Office and the Foreign Office were overruled in an attempt to climb down and reach a compromise and that further concessions may be contemplated.

I know that those of us who hold this belief are criticised for harbouring unworthy suspicions and for mean-spiritedly declining to join the general congratulations extended to Humphrey Atkins around the Christmas Crib. If that is so, there is a simple way to dispel our suspicions and convict us of malice. That is for the Home Secretary and the Secretary of State for Scotland forthwith to introduce into H.M. prisons in the rest of the U.K. the same humanitarian measures which are being, or in future may be, implemented in Ulster. If the grounds for those reforms are indeed, as alleged, humanitarian, there is no justification for any discrimination against prisoners in Great Britain. The 'Diplock courts' are irrelevant. A prisoner is presumably entitled to humane incarceration, whatever the judicial process by which he was sentenced. Indeed, the case for the reforms is actually

stronger on the mainland, where prisoners are often more remote from their families and where prison conditions in general are, confessedly, less modern.

However, be that as it may, let us take the Northern Ireland Office at the face value of its protestations. It has declared, and claims to have established by deeds as well as words, that there can be no special or different treatment for any convicted prisoners on the ground of the real or alleged political or other motivation of their crimes. If so, the continuing concession of just that special treatment to between 300 and 400 prisoners in Northern Ireland is unjustified and unacceptable and must, on the Government's own showing, be revoked without delay. Amid the general pother of recent weeks it seems to have been overlooked that the Government is continuing the very status which has been almost universally repudiated. Not only did William Whitelaw, the originator of the mischief, recant long ago in terms so abject that one suspects Keith Joseph himself must have had a hand in the drafting; but Gerry Fitt, who urged and abetted him in those disastrous far-off days, has earned a veritable halo by confessing and condemning his own error.

Not by one word has anyone on any side even attempted to argue that political status is unacceptable for crimes committed since March 1976 but acceptable and justifiable for crimes committed before that date. The arguments and the condemnation, if valid at all, are valid for all prisoners. The decision in 1976 to phase political status out by abolishing it first from a current cut-off date was taken on purely expedient grounds, due to the physical fact that additional cellular accommodation was at that time only beginning to become available. There was no question, as there could and can be no question, of any compact or guarantee for those convicted of crimes committed earlier that they would

for ever be treated specially. Indeed, the very notion of such a compact would import hideous injustice.

Even so, however, my colleagues and I in the Ulster Unionist Parliamentary Party were deeply uneasy at the prospect of political status continuing at all, let alone for so long and on so substantial a scale. I think there is no harm, at this distance of five years, in my revealing that we went over the details of prison accommodation most anxiously with the then minister, Don Concannon, before we reluctantly allowed ourselves to be convinced that political status had to be phased out and could not be abolished at a stroke.

Now the situation is essentially different. The cellular accommodation is there and still expanding: the physical factor can no longer be urged. What is more, the Government claims to have fought and won the moral and psychological battle against the principle of special category. Thereby special category has ceased to be a survival regretfully tolerated. It has become an affront which cannot be defended. The same government which has refused to open another university of crime and terrorism in Her Majesty's prisons for post-1976 entrants will stand naked to the world if it continues to tolerate the existing university. If the students of that university dislike being treated in the way the voice not only of Parliament but of worldwide opinion has declared they should be treated - namely, just like other prisoners - their thoughts might perhaps wander in the direction of a hunger strike. If so, they should know that a parliament, a government, a province and a people who have won that battle once on the issue of principle will be in no mood to lose it again now upon the application of the principle.