

BUSINESS

The Lord President said that opposed private business down under Business of the House for Wednesday concerned the British Transport Docks Board.

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Lord President confirmed that Monday was the most likely date for a Statement on Northern Ireland. He thought that the Statement would be favourably received in the House although there were always those who would disagree. Asked about the "special factors" which had prevented a Statement that day he pointed out that the associated White Paper was not ready and it would have been difficult immediately after Cabinet and a meeting of Ministers to rush straight into a Statement. Since Friday was not a good day, Monday became the favoured date.

He said the Bill was likely this session and did not rule out the possibility of Monday. To suggestions that there was a shortage of Parliamentary time for consideration of the proposals and that they might meet considerable opposition, he pointed out that Ministers had considered the matter carefully over many weeks and had reached the conclusion that it was right to proceed. Referring to the word "solution" in one of the questions he said that the problems of Northern Ireland were inherently without solution. It was important to re-establish in some way conditions under which the people could live in peace. The proposals would be very much discussed. The whole matter was controversial by definition.

Commenting specifically on doubts and hesitancy in Cabinet he said that these were difficult matters of opinion and judgement. It was not just a discussion about, for instance, a spending decision; it was a complex judgement about the best way to make progress in a difficult situation. There had been an interesting and helpful discussion in Cabinet that morning. He rejected the idea that there had been a "row".

The Lord President confirmed the Government's intention to legislate and he agreed with the suggestion that this should be through by July. The legislation was of a constitutional nature.

C AND AG

Asked about the amendment to the Local Government Finance Bill concerning the C and AG and his access to Audit Commission papers, the Lord President said this was under consideration. He did not think Mr Ridley would refer to this point in the debate on Wednesday since it was not strictly relevant. The Lord President did not like the idea of too many people looking at the books of either local authorities or nationalised industries. The local authorities did not want more than the Audit Commission and if the nationalised industries were being expected to behave in a commercial way then it would be wrong to occupy too much time and divert too much energy to meeting the needs of outside scrutiny.

Asked if he would not agree that Parliament had a direct responsibility for public expenditure wherever it occurred, he said that in the case of local authorities and nationalised industries the responsibility was more remote and, particularly in the case of local authorities, devolved.

ORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

He agreed that the independent nature of the C and AG was constitutionally important.

PRIVATISATION OF ROPs

To suggestions that the Prime Minister had seemed unexpectedly discouraging in her comments about privatisation of the Royal Ordnance Factories, the Lord President said that the MOD was certainly investigating prospects but it was not something that could be done all that quickly and this was not a good moment to make a move. The Government certainly wished to privatise in principle.

FALKLAND ISLANDS

The Lord President referred to the previous day's Statement and the continuing wish to keep the House informed. He agreed that the Government was very concerned about the situation but he did not agree that the affair would produce any fundamental changes in the number of ships made available to the Royal Navy in the future. He encouraged suggestions that the Argentinians were in a certain amount of difficulty and that the issue might help them internally. The Government was using every endeavour to cool the situation diplomatically and other countries were joining in that effort.

The Lord President noted that the story was one that appealed to many people. This fact itself did not help the situation. The origins of the situation had been trivial but things were more serious now.

To questions about our outposts being vulnerable, he pointed out that outposts were always difficult to defend. Asked if the FCO wanted to be rid of the Falkland Islands, the Lord President said he did not know whether they did or not but the House of Commons did not and the question did not arise.

CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

Asked about the number of days allowed for the Criminal Justice Bill and whether or not another day would be allowed for a debate on hanging, he said that if a new clause was tabled it would have to be coped with. For a debate on hanging there would have to be adequate time.

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