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From: THE PRIVATE SECRETARY

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CPC



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16 June 1986

*Prime Minister
These seem
reasonable conclusions
COP
15/6*

Handwritten initials

Dear Charles,

CONTINGENCY PLANNING IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Thank you for your letter of 29 May.

The figure of three weeks which the Secretary of State mentioned in relation to MACM plans stems from the concept that these are contingency plans for short-term assistance to the civil administration; the military personnel involved would work intensively for up to 16-18 hours per day, and after three weeks operator fatigue would be the determining factor. (This assumes that all plans are in full operation simultaneously: individual plans can be maintained for appreciably longer periods). It would, of course, be possible to extend the overall period, but to this end, HQNI would have to

- a) consider, in much greater detail, a central management plan;
- b) discuss this in advance with the essential services most concerned; and
- c) consult with MOD on the resupply of men for the longer period. The bill would of course be heavy and specialists in short supply.

The Secretary of State has asked HQNI in consultation with MOD, to take items a) and c) above as far forward as possible. But b) presents real problems. To avoid raising the temperature, or undermining public confidence, we have kept our contingency planning exclusively within Government, and my Secretary of State has felt that to breach that when the risk for which we are planning is low, would be counterproductive. He suggests that it would be preferable to use the three

[I think this must be right]

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week MACM period, together with the warning period - say, a month in all - to complete our planning and organisation for any longer haul.

We have given thought as to whether the import of civilian managers and technicians would help us in the circumstances of the Northern Ireland Electricity Service. The difficulty is that their NIES counterparts, while being very much in sympathy with the declared aims of any loyalist strike, do clearly feel a great sense of responsibility. They are concerned that the power supply should not drop to a level which renders the distribution system unstable and leads to total loss of power. It would be difficult to recover from that situation, and the population would suffer real hardship. The import of staff from GB would undermine that sense of responsibility. NIES staff would feel that they could withdraw, since the Government had accepted the liability. The new staff would require a period of familiarisation, and even then could not be expected to run the generation system at anything like its capacity; and finally, and most seriously, their very presence would be likely to place the distribution system which is highly vulnerable, at risk. The Prime Minister will wish to know that the Secretary of State discussed this question privately with the Chairman and Chief Executive of the NIES immediately following the day of action on 3 March. They advised most strongly that the import of personnel would seriously add to rather than solve their problems. In these circumstances, the Secretary of State would not wish to pursue this option further.

The position is much simpler as regards oil. The existing plan requires the requisition of the major oil terminal in Northern Ireland; even if management refused to continue to work and co-operate with government, their functions could be met by specialist servicemen. The plan envisages this worst case, with distribution being in the hands of army personnel.

The Prime Minister also asked about food distribution. We had not envisaged distributing food and essentials to individuals: our concern is to move it from the docks, to ensure their continued operation, and to rely on the wholesale/retail private sector for the distribution. Experience has shown that they are effective in getting round problems, and if we were to try to take on the task, we would have to consider detailed schemes of rationing, etc. We think it most unlikely that loyalists would seek to prevent food getting to the population: and the Secretary of State suggests that any difficulties would be better blamed on a strike than on a cumbersome and imperfect form of state control. Nevertheless, the Prime Minister's question has led us to focus on some inadequacies in our arrangements, and we shall be giving this further thought with the NI Departments concerned.

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Finally, I turn to the health and ambulance services. In the winter of 1978/79, consideration was given to the use of service personnel on the lines of the arrangements agreed with MOD in Great Britain. It was however concluded that the security situation ruled that out. We feel that the reasoning remains valid; servicemen in ambulances would be regarded by some as legitimate targets, and the resources required to protect them would be substantial.

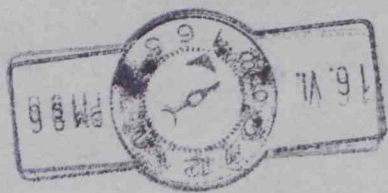
Health Service workers have taken part in action in pursuit of an industrial grievance, but not as part of a political protest. There are of course contingency plans, based on assistance from voluntary aid societies and the police, and these proved adequate during seven months of intermittent industrial action in 1982, and also as recently as October of last year. Given the security situation, the work record of the health and ambulance workers, and our ability to restrict medical treatment to emergencies only, the Secretary of State is confident that existing plans represent the most productive stance for government.

/ Copies of this letter go to the Private Secretaries of the other members of OD(I), and to the Private Secretaries to the Secretary of State for Energy and Sir Robert Armstrong.

Yours Sincerely
Neil Ward.

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repeal Section 41 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act? Why does he need to remove the duty on him to continue to give that specific advice free? That is the question.

Lord Belstead: I am glad the noble Lord, Lord Melchett, has asked that question, because it is a perfectly fair one. The answer to it is, if I may be absolutely honest, that in drawing a line which I have made a statement about we would be having to use the words I have already used, "an honest judgment". It would be possible if the farmer believed, or indeed not only the farmer under Clause 1(1) but someone involved in the food industry or in rural diversification—maybe a whole variety of people—but if the recipient believed the line was being drawn in the wrong place, I have said in the statement I made there would be a right of appeal to the regional panel of the Ministry whose advice the Minister almost always accepts. So we believe this would be the right way of going about it.

But it would be very much more serious to say that there had been a statutory breach when you are having to draw a line using your honest judgment. It cannot be an exact science. That is an honest answer.

Lord Melchett: If I may say so, at last we have got to the nub of the question which this amendment was designed to address. We have spent a long time—the clock has not been restarted, but I think it is about 66 minutes—getting to what I had hoped the noble Lord would have said after I moved the amendment, and then we could have embarked on the debate which I hope we can now embark on, which is what this amendment was designed to address our minds to.

As I understand it, what the noble Lord is saying is that if you introduce charging for any part of the ADAS advisory service, it is impossible to have a statutory duty on ADAS to provide any advice, however narrowly drawn that advice might be because in practice there will always be a boundary, and you will always come up against a statutory obligation to give advice.

What I do not follow from what the noble Lord said is what the implications of that would be. If the noble Lord the Minister has said that it was his policy to give free advice on conservation and diversification, and that is what ADAS are under instruction to do, and the farmer then appeals, surely he would have a right to go to court to enforce the Minister's policy against ADAS, just as the farmer would have the right to go to court if the Minister is under a statutory duty to do the same thing. Or is that the effect what this is taking away—the right of farmers to go to an independent tribunal to get the Minister to carry out the Minister's policy? Are we talking about the difference between an advisory panel making a decision, or a farmer having the right to take the Minister to court? Can the noble Lord tell me that?

Lord Belstead: The noble Lord, Lord Melchett, has put his finger again on a point. We are talking about the difference between an appeal to an advisory panel, which is well understood, certainly by farmers in all localities. There are a large number of appeals going on about the extension of less favoured areas, for

instance. The farming community know very well about this. We would not be talking about an appeal to a court.

Lord Melchett: It seems to me that that raises serious issues. So far as I know, the Government have not admitted that this is the case up to now, that what they are doing by making all this advice simply a discretionary power rather than a duty is preventing anybody insisting that they carry out their policy and give advice on these matters. Frankly, I find that unacceptable, and I hope the Committee will find it unacceptable. Certainly I shall want to come back on Report stage with an amendment which does not have the technical defects which the noble Lord kindly pointed out to the Government's version of the amendment of the noble Lord, Lord Sandford, and insist that the the Minister should have a statutory duty to give advice on matters which the Minister is saying he will do anyhow. If that means that the Ministry ends up in court for not carrying out their duty, I do not see that that is a great advantage to anyone, except possibly the Minister. It will be a great advantage to the farmers and the countryside as a whole. I beg leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

The Earl of Swinton: I beg to move that the House do now resume.

Moved accordingly, and, on Question, Motion agreed to.

House resumed.

Northern Ireland Assembly

4.40 p.m.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Northern Ireland Office (Lord Lyell): My Lords, with the leave of the House, I now repeat the Statement being made in another place by my right honourable friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. The Statement is as follows;

"Under the Northern Ireland Act 1982 the present Assembly has two functions: first, to consider and report on how a devolved Northern Ireland administration should be formed. Secondly, the Act requires the Assembly to monitor and report on the policies and activities of the Northern Ireland departments.

"The task of making proposals on devolution was undoubtedly made much more difficult by the regrettable decision of the SDLP not to take their seats. The Assembly has not been able to come forward with agreed proposals and there is no present prospect of that occurring. As for the monitoring of the Northern Ireland departments, the Assembly suspended this work on 5th December. In spite of clear warnings about the threat that this action would pose to the continuation of the Assembly, the Unionist parties have not been prepared to resume this function. As a result, the Alliance Party withdrew from the Assembly since they believed there was no longer any useful role to be played.

[LORD LYELL.]

"On 13th March the Assembly formally resolved not to carry out its monitoring functions, to wind up the Devolution Report Committee and merely to meet one afternoon a week for a debate on aspects of the Anglo-Irish agreement.

"The position therefore is that the present Assembly charged under the Northern Ireland Act 1982 with two important functions is now discharging neither. As long ago as last December in this House, I warned that if the Assembly continued the suspension of its scrutiny role for long, questions about its future would inevitably arise; and on 1st May and 19th May I repeated this warning. On 27th May I invited the leaders of the main parties in the Assembly to discuss with me the position of the present Assembly. The leaders of the two main Unionist parties refused even to talk about it. I regret that I have therefore had to reach my decision without hearing their views.

"The decision I have now taken is to lay an order today for the Assembly's dissolution under the powers in Section 5(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1982. This order will come before the House for debate under the affirmative procedure. In taking this step I would make the following points. The present Assembly would in any case reach the end of its normal life on 20th October. There would then automatically within six weeks be fresh elections for a new Assembly. The effect of this order is not to abolish the legal basis for an Assembly but simply to dissolve the present Assembly and to leave open the date for a new election for a fresh Assembly.

"I wish to emphasise to the House that dissolution of the present Assembly in no way conflicts with our desire for devolved government nor our commitment to the Anglo-Irish agreement. Devolution remains the Government's preferred option and I hope that we may see a future Assembly playing a responsible and valuable role in the Province. The sooner that happens, the better.

"Meanwhile, the Government remain ready to discuss with all the constitutional parties in Northern Ireland the best way forward. In particular I would urge the Unionist parties to return to this House to argue their case and to take up the offer of my right honourable friend the Prime Minister to discuss with her the four matters proposed: namely, devolution and the possibility of a round table conference; the future of the Assembly; arrangements for handling Northern Ireland business at Westminster; and new means of consultation between the Government and Unionist leaders.

"Only if we are prepared to talk together and discuss these matters can we hope fully to play our separate but complementary roles in building a better future for the people of Northern Ireland".
My Lords, that concludes the Statement.

4.45 p.m.

Lord Prys-Davies: My Lords, we thank the noble Lord, Lord Lyell, for repeating the Statement made by the Secretary of State in the other place. Many of us who believe that devolution can help to satisfy the aspirations in Northern Ireland will have received the

Statement with a great deal of sadness. But we are gratified that the door opened by the 1982 Act still remains open.

We agree that the present evidence indicates that a newly-elected Assembly would not, at this stage, produce the will among the constitutional parties to work together. This is not the time to apportion blame for this state of affairs. But to elect an Assembly which would not work together in support of the prescribed functions of the Assembly would appear to be a pretty pointless exercise.

The Government propose to dissolve the Assembly by an Order in Council and not to abolish its legal basis. We regard this as encouraging, because this means that an Assembly could be revived by an Order in Council if the Government were satisfied that the constitutional parties in Northern Ireland were committed to making it work. This is important because we believe that the 1982 Act still provides probably the best platform upon which Northern Ireland can build for itself a better future.

Nevertheless, it should not be overlooked that the Assembly played a valuable role for three years in the scrutiny of Northern Ireland measures, and it compensated for some of the deficiencies of legislating for Northern Ireland largely by means of Orders in Council. Those of us who speak regularly on Northern Ireland measures benefited greatly from the knowledge and experience of the Assembly Members. We trust that when the House debates the order dissolving the Assembly the Government will have something to say about how Parliament, in the absence of an Assembly for any length of time, can improve its scrutiny of the contents of direct rule measures. We consider this also to be important.

Finally, we endorse the Government's invitation to the constitutional parties to return to discussions and to a possible round table conference. We hope that that invitation will be accepted, and that before too long we shall have the pleasure of debating an order authorising fresh elections to an Assembly.

Lord Donaldson of Kingsbridge: My Lords, I should like to associate our Benches with what my noble friend has just said. We may feel sad, as he does, but we can hardly be surprised that the Government find it necessary to take some action. The Assembly was formed, as the Statement tells us, originally as an all-party group to examine how to set up a devolved Northern Ireland administration, and to monitor and report on the Northern Ireland departments. It now consists of one party only, the SDLP having led to its downfall by refusing to co-operate. It is therefore unable to consider how to make an advance towards an all-party Assembly, and recently it has refused to continue with its duties of monitoring. It had only two functions, and it is not performing either of them now, though up to date it has been fairly decently paid for its attendance.

We cannot hesitate for one moment in approving the Government's action. We are also grateful that it is not final, and that it leaves the machinery behind the Assembly available so that at some later stage something new and more constructive may be done. I end by saying that as we on these Benches are convinced—and I think that a lot of other noble Lords

share this view—that there can be no move forward in Northern Ireland without some shape or form of shared government, we must hope that the Members of the Assembly, who have a bit more time to do other things than go to the Assembly, will spend at least some of it in trying to help the Government to persuade all parties to get together again so that a new Assembly may be formed which will be properly functional as soon as possible.

Lord Lyell: My Lords, may I briefly reply to the noble Lord, Lord Prys-Davies, and the noble Lord, Lord Donaldson, and thank both noble Lords, and especially the noble Lord, Lord Prys-Davies, for his welcome to the Statement that I read out. We believe that the Statement that I have read out today, and what has happened, need not be the end of the road. We hope that it is not, for an elected Assembly acting constructively, as many of us believe they did until fairly recently, is a valuable institution. We want to have a new election when attitudes change, and that is particularly important.

The noble Lord, Lord Prys-Davies, stressed the aspect of devolution. I am sure he will agree and all students of Northern Ireland matters and those of your Lordships who speak on them will agree that integration would not solve Northern Ireland's problems, because of its divided community, its politics, and, above all, its different attitudes on many issues. All of these warrant special treatment. The Government's objective remains the establishment of a new devolved government because it could give—I stress the words “could give”—politicians from all parts of the community in Northern Ireland a real say in developing and protecting the interests of their constituents.

We have no illusions that any progress will be easy. We shall do our utmost to promote it. Your Lordships will agree that any new arrangements must be acceptable throughout the community if they are, first, to survive and, secondly, to work effectively.

We thank the noble Lord, Lord Donaldson of Kingsbridge, for his welcome and his wise words today. He is sad, as indeed all of us are. We agree on that. We agree that the two functions of the Assembly have not been carried out—and certainly not constructively. All the politicians who have hitherto taken part in the Assembly should pay attention to the wise words of the noble Lord, Lord Donaldson, because he has considerable experience of working both here and in Northern Ireland. We believe that the politicians would benefit from paying heed to his words.

Lord Houghton of Sowerby: My Lords, is this not another confession of failure regarding the problems of Northern Ireland? I am merely a distressed observer of the condition of Northern Ireland; I have been that for the last 50 years. This latest move almost confirms the belief that we have an insoluble problem on our hands. Your Lordships should be a little sensitive to suggestions that parts of the institution of parliamentary democracy should be abolished when it is believed that they have ceased to be useful. We are ourselves very sensitive to the word “abolition”. We ought to be on guard against believing that institutions have failed when miraculously they have shown a new

lease of life and have come to be regarded with great respect and as being useful, sober and worthwhile. Your Lordships' House has emerged from this kind of condition of uselessness in its time.

We should be a little careful about meting on any other assembly within the body politic the sort of fate that some people would have visited upon us. It is a great pity if one abolishes anything that has been set up to achieve a particular purpose unless there is something else to put in its place. I do not believe it helps to say that the Government's aim remains as something which at the present time is not within sight. It strikes me that people are looking upon the Northern Ireland situation as Britain's permanent confession of failure to solve the problem of unity within the United Kingdom; but we go round the world telling everybody else how to get rid of their internal difficulties. I think our reputation for hypocrisy and incompetence must surely shine throughout the world.

Lord Lyell: My Lords, I immediately refute the two words to which the noble Lord referred—hypocrisy and incompetence. I do not think any fair and unbiased observer would label the efforts of this Government and, indeed, successive governments in the past with those two words. The noble Lord mentioned at least three times the word “abolition”. May I stress to him especially, and to your Lordships, that we are not abolishing the Assembly; we are dissolving it. There is a major difference.

As I pointed out in the opening Statement, we are dissolving the Assembly under the powers we have in Section 5 of the 1982 Act. We are dissolving it for all the reasons I explained both in the answers I gave to the noble Lords, Lord Prys-Davies and Lord Donaldson, and in the opening Statement. The Statement of my right honourable friend spelt out the reasons for taking this action. We regret it, we are sad; but I refute the two labels of hypocrisy and incompetence which the noble Lord seeks to place on our efforts. The Government will spare no effort to try to resolve the appallingly difficult problems of Northern Ireland which have been spelled out in your Lordships' House. I give that undertaking. We are not pleased that we have to take this action, but we believe that it is about the only option open to us.

Lord Monson: My Lords, will the noble Lord the Minister assure the House on behalf of Her Majesty's Government that in future the people of Northern Ireland will be accorded the same democratic rights as are enjoyed by the people of the rest of the United Kingdom? In particular, will he assure the House that future legislation affecting the Province will be subject to full parliamentary deliberation and scrutiny, including the power to amend such legislation as and when Parliament considers it right to do so?

Lord Lyell: My Lords, the opening service (if I may put it that way) of the noble Lord, Lord Monson, was getting quite away from today's Statement. However, he referred to scrutiny in dealing with Northern Ireland parliamentary and political arrangements. The opening Statement stressed that my right honourable friend the Prime Minister would be very willing to

[LORD LYELL.]

discuss with the leaders of the Unionist Party four matters, one of which was the arrangements for handling Northern Ireland business at Westminster. I hope that that places squarely on the record what my right honourable friend would wish to discuss with the leaders of the Unionist Party. We hope that they will take up this invitation.

Lord Fitt: My Lords, is it not a sad commentary that 14 years after the abolition of Stormont in 1972 by order of the House of Commons we now have the seventh Secretary of State—five of them have been Conservative and two Labour—coming to the House this afternoon to admit that yet another initiative has failed? Will the noble Lord the Minister accept from me as one who has lived through those years in Northern Ireland that the failure lay not with any single one of those Secretaries of State to try to find a solution to the problem? The failure lay with the problem of the Northern Ireland people. The nearest that we ever came to success was the initiative of 1973 known as Sunningdale, which was the most hopeful political development that we had had throughout the years, but unfortunately it was brought crashing to the ground.

Will the noble Lord accept that the failure of the Assembly is to be laid at the feet not of any one of the political parties, but of a combination of every single one of them, perhaps excluding the Alliance? Will he also accept that the Unionist Members at Westminster in 1982, when the legislation was going through the House, expressed their opposition to the Assembly, but attempted subsequently to make it work, whereas the SDLP and Sinn Fein representatives totally boycotted it and made its failure certain?

Will the noble Lord accept that sentiments now being expressed by the leaders of the various political parties in Northern Ireland that they want to talk without preconditions are just so much hot air because they all have their own conditions? Does he accept the fact that the Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Council has made it more difficult for talks on devolution to take place? There are many members of the Unionist majority who regard the existence of the Anglo-Irish intergovernmental conference as being a precondition in itself. Will the noble Lord agree that following the failure of this latest initiative the only hope of any help towards solving the ongoing problem in Northern Ireland is to be found within the confines of Northern Ireland and the island of Ireland and that no solution can emanate from this House?

5 p.m.

Lord Lyell: My Lords, perhaps I may first deal with the noble Lord's last point. He is getting a little wide of the somewhat narrow crack that I beat this afternoon in regard to the Statement. Perhaps the noble Lord will go over this again when we debate the order, which we shall be doing at a future date. Perhaps I may then be able to approach the noble Lord's question and do a little more justice to it. I think that your Lordships would not wish me to go too far down that path this afternoon.

The noble Lord referred to the regrettable fact that the SDLP refused to attend this Assembly, and I

pointed that out in my opening comments in relation to my right honourable friend's Statement earlier this afternoon. I believe that the House would wish the Government to take a constructive line, and that we should not rake over the reasons for failure. We can learn lessons, and I hope that we shall, but I hope that the tenor of everything I have said this afternoon, both in the Statement and in reply to your Lordships, has been one of seeking for a constructive solution. I think that that, too, was the tenor of the questions asked by the noble Lord, Lord Fitt, today. I would thank him for his kind comments about successive Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland, and I am sure that his good wishes cover all of your Lordships and everybody who has tried to serve in Northern Ireland. I stress that we adopt a constructive outlook, and I hope that we might be able to have more to say on that on a future occasion.

Lord Moran: My Lords, as today's announcement seems to mark the failure of this particular experiment in devolution, might it not be sensible, despite the special problems of Northern Ireland to which the noble Lord referred, to consider in future treating Northern Ireland more like other parts of the United Kingdom?

Lord Lyell: My Lords, that is a very interesting thought and we are very grateful to the noble Lord for raising it. May I ask him whether we might cover that a little more fully when we debate the whole of this order, which we shall be doing, I hope, in the near future? It is one part of the political argument that is under way at the moment in Northern Ireland. As I suggested to your Lordships, we believe that devolution is the best avenue; but perhaps we may leave discussion of that particular aspect to a later date.

Lord Blease: My Lords, I should like to join in thanking the noble Lord the Minister for repeating the Statement. I cannot say that I welcome it, but I certainly understand and accept the inevitability of the situation that has brought about the reasons for the Statement. I note that we are to be presented with an Order in Council next week, when we shall have an opportunity to debate the position and the Government's policy. Today, I should like, with others, to express the regret that elected members of the Assembly failed to fulfil the democratic functions of the Northern Ireland Assembly and its devolved powers, although important powers, in promoting a basis for justice, peace and prosperity in the Province.

I think that this would be an opportune time for me to pay tribute and commend highly the thoughtful efforts and work of the Speaker, Mr. Jim Kilfedder; the Clerk, Mr. Kennedy; and the officers and staff of the Assembly, all of whom worked under extreme difficulties earnestly and genuinely to uphold the principles and practices of parliamentary democracy. I should like to conclude my brief remarks on this Statement at this stage by quoting two sentences from a statement made by the Prime Minister in the House of Commons on 26th November last. The Prime Minister said:

"We, the United Kingdom Government, accountable to Parliament, remain responsible for the government of Northern

Ireland . . . we will make determined efforts to resolve differences." [Official Report, Commons, 26/11/85; col. 752]

Matters have been raised here today about the rights and about the dissolution, and, in my view, the disillusion leaves a vacuum. I consider that rights in Northern Ireland are on a parity with those of the rest of the United Kingdom. What is required, as others have stated here, is that those rights be exercised. I think that a dangerous void exists in the vital democratic processes in Northern Ireland. It cannot be filled by ministerial statements, nor by the verbiage of politicians; nor, indeed, by the media announcements of clergy and others. I believe that it requires concerted action on agreed principles. Therefore, I hope that the Minister, when he comes to us—if it is to be next week—to debate the order will assure us of the determined measures by which the Government now propose to bring about the brighter picture of the future, to which the Minister referred, to bring peace and prosperity with justice in Northern Ireland.

Lord Lyell: My Lords, I hope that I have guarded my words suitably about the time at which we shall come to debate this order; but it will be in the near future. That is all I will indicate to the noble Lord. We are very grateful for his forthright support for the efforts that are made by everybody, particularly by the Government and all of those who seek to assist in the political life of Northern Ireland. But the noble Lord rightly stresses that all of us are seeking after peace and prosperity in Northern Ireland.

Quite rightly the noble Lord also stresses that dissolution leaves a vacuum. I hope that in my replies this afternoon and in the Statement we have gone some way to try to set out our ideas on the decision that we have taken, why we have taken it, and, I hope, some avenues for hope in the future. I note the noble Lord's comments and indeed his tributes to the Speaker of the Assembly and to others who have served so well, so long and so loyally to try to make it work. I think that tributes are due from all of us. We share the noble Lord's sadness that the Members of the Assembly felt unable to carry out their main task of scrutinising the work of the Northern Ireland departments.

Agriculture Bill

5.8 p.m.

House again in Committee, on Clause 1.

Lord Melchett moved Amendment No. 4:

Page 1, line 11, after ("countryside;") insert—
 (" () the promotion of public enjoyment of the countryside;")

The noble Lord said: I beg to move Amendment No. 4. I think it would be convenient to take with this amendment, Amendment No. 77, which has the same effect as regards Scotland as would Amendment No. 4 for England and Wales. I hope that we can take this and the next two lots of amendments in my name rather more speedily than was the case with Amendment No. 3. As noble Lords will know, Clause 12 gives the Minister of Agriculture a new and, I must say for my part, very welcome duty to have regard to the promotion of the enjoyment of the countryside by

the public and to endeavour to achieve a reasonable balance between that and a number of other considerations—the promotion of a healthy agricultural industry, conservation and so on.

As I say, that is very welcome and I have no complaints about the range of new duties which Clause 12 will introduce. But I am concerned that the same recognition of the importance of promoting public enjoyment of the countryside has not been carried into Clause 1 of the Bill. It seems to me that, however we draw the line and whether there is a duty or a power, and so on, the Ministry's advisory service will be one of the principal means through which it implements the new duties that are placed on the Minister by Clause 12. It therefore seems to me important that in Clause 1, when we look at the remit of the advisory service, it should be at least as wide as the new duties placed on the Minister by Clause 12. That is what this amendment and Amendment No. 77 would do. They would include in Clause 1 (though it is not included at the moment) the promotion of the public enjoyment of the countryside. It seems to me that unless I have misunderstood Clause 1, at the moment the way it is drafted would mean that, for example, if ADAS was visiting a farm to advise on conservation and the amenity of the farm, it would be outside its statutory remit to provide some literature about increasing access on that farm and providing facilities for people wishing to enjoy the countryside, such as picnic sites and so on.

I am sure that is not the intention and that ADAS will want to be involved in that field as it is becoming involved in the giving of conservation advice. This amendment would ensure that that was a possibility. Whether it actually did it of course would be up to the Minister, because it would be a discretionary power. I beg to move.

Lord Houghton of Sowerby: I wish to support this amendment. I believe that the enjoyment of the countryside will become a greater importance as the years go by. I think this whole question of land use and the rights of the public to have access to the countryside will become a major social and political issue. Surely before very long the present madness of growing to excess cereal crops that apparently are going to benefit nobody but the Russians will have to come to an end. The question of land use will arise when cereal growing has ceased to be the prevailing economic lunacy. Then the time will come when either we have alternative crops or we find alternative uses for our land.

When you come to think of it, it is rather disgraceful, however angry we may feel about the hippy convoy, that we have to push people from place to place because there is no land upon which they can go temporarily, even to follow the mode of life they feel they want to follow. We are horrible to the gypsies; we are beastly to the hippy convoy. We think that everyone should live in houses, but we do not make it our business to see that they are there to live in. We are really a quite ridiculous people when it comes to matters of this kind.

So far as the use of land is concerned there ought to be a wider recreational use of the land by people. Every beauty spot is overcrowded; motorcars go into open

[LORD HOUGHTON OF SOWERBY.]
gates; litter is left all over the countryside. There is nowhere to go. Notices say that trespassers will be prosecuted and you must not go on to the land. Footpaths are obscured and wheat crops are grown so that you do not know where the paths are. Urban dwellers have a respect for the land and they do not like wandering through growing crops even to re-establish their right to a footpath.

We must now recognise that the enjoyment of the countryside by the people—a growing population—including those who want more recreational opportunities and more relaxation from the pressures of life is going to be of much greater value than large parts of the National Health Service, which is not a health service but a sickness service. I believe the health of the country is going to lie in wider, fresh opportunities to regard the land as our own, and if it is not used for vital food production, it should be turned over to those of us who can enjoy it much better than we now have the opportunity to do.

Lord Craigton: I rise to support this amendment because I think that without expert advice the enjoyment of the countryside can do more harm than good. The farmer has to have some expert advice on how people should enjoy it and where they should go. Left to himself, he might do more damage conservationwise than with the advice of ADAS. For that reason I support the amendment.

The Earl of Onslow: I should like to support the amendment for two reasons. First, Clause 12 refers to the promotion of the enjoyment of the countryside by the public, and surely ADAS should be used to support that. Secondly, it is infinitely better that people should have access, and it is, after all, everybody's countryside. Even though I own some land, I am quite happy for people to enjoy my little bit. But I should like other people who live in the crowded south-east of England where I live to enjoy it responsibly and to keep to public footpaths. I want to get advice because there is room for all people to enjoy the land. As amended—I am sure the noble Lord, Lord Houghton, will appreciate this—I think the provision means that as fox hunting folk we can ask for advice on covers and how to make hunt ditches. I am sure beyond peradventure that the noble Lord, Lord Houghton, would love that.

Lord Walston: All I wish to do from these Benches is to give our support and my personal support to this amendment. The principle, as the noble Earl, Lord Onslow, has pointed out, is established in Clause 12(1)(d), and when we come to that it will be worthy of complete support. This amendment does no more than make it easier for farmers to fulfil one of the objectives of the occupation or ownership of agricultural land.

5.15 p.m.

Lord John-Mackie: We certainly support my noble friend's amendment, but I hope he does not wish ADAS to be chivvying people into the countryside and forcing them to enjoy it. It rather gives me that impression; nevertheless we support it.

When I first came to this Chamber I was not very sure of the procedure and I followed the noble Lord, Lord Houghton, on something. I criticised what he had said and that brought him to his feet again and he spoke for another 10 to 15 minutes when we were rather wanting to get away home. So I got up and was going to apologise for doing that, but I was shouted down because I was not supposed to speak a second time. I am rather tempted to say something about what the noble Lord said in regard to wheat growers when he turned to the economic side of farming. However, I think I had better refrain at the moment. There will be an opportunity at a later stage of the Bill.

Lord Belstead: This is an interesting amendment, and once again it has received much support. It is unusual in such circumstances for a Minister to turn down an invitation to extend the Government's powers, but I am going to make a case for doing so. I would remind your Lordships that Clause 1 of the Bill already provides powers for advice to be given to any person on a very wide range of issues, including those relating to the natural beauty and amenity of the countryside and any other agricultural activity or enterprise of benefit to the rural economy. As the noble Lord, Lord Walston, quite rightly said, the requirements of Clause 12 to have regard to and endeavour to balance all the considerations set out in that clause, including the promotion of the enjoyment of the countryside by the public, apply as much to ADAS as they do to other statutory activities and, I contend, would adequately meet the concerns which have been expressed.

I am saying this because I think a difficulty would arise if this amendment were to be accepted, to the extent that the powers it would give would impinge on the responsibilities of existing statutory and other bodies with interests in this area. I am glad to say that ADAS enjoys good working relations with such bodies as the Countryside Commission, the Development Commission and so on. And of course there are voluntary bodies doing an excellent job. I am simply saying that I do not think it would be a good idea if it were to appear that the statutory remit of ADAS was being constantly and specifically extended when other agencies already have a statutory responsibility.

The Committee may ask: what am I getting at? I am getting at the fact that the Countryside Commission is after all under a statutory remit under the Countryside Act 1968 to encourage the provision and improvement, for persons resorting to the countryside, of facilities for the enjoyment of the countryside and of open air recreation in the countryside. Excellent though working relations are with the Countryside Commission and ADAS, I am not entirely sure that the commission would welcome with open arms the news that quite suddenly an exactly parallel statutory responsibility had been laid on the Ministry of Agriculture. The Countryside Commission could quite reasonably pick up the telephone and say to my right honourable friend, "It is all very well. We thought we worked well with you. Are you now trying to take a statutory responsibility from us?"

Not very long ago—about six months or more ago—the Countryside Commission produced an absolutely excellent pamphlet on access to the

Northern Ireland Assembly

4.2 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. Tom King): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I wish to make a statement about the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Under the Northern Ireland Act 1982 the present Assembly has two functions. The first is to consider and report on how a devolved Northern Ireland Administration should be formed. Secondly, the Act requires the Assembly to monitor and report on the policies and activities of the Northern Ireland Departments.

The task of making proposals on devolution was undoubtedly made much more difficult by the regrettable decision of members of the SDLP not to take their seats. The Assembly has not been able to come forward with agreed proposals and there is no present prospect of that occurring. As for the monitoring of the Northern Ireland Departments, the Assembly suspended this work on 5 December. In spite of clear warnings about the threat that this action would pose to the continuation of the Assembly, the Unionist parties have not been prepared to resume this function. As a result, the Alliance party withdrew from the Assembly since it believed that there was no longer any useful role to be played.

On 13 March the Assembly formally resolved not to carry out its monitoring functions, to wind up the Devolution Report Committee, and merely to meet one afternoon a week for a debate on aspects of the Anglo-Irish agreement.

The position, therefore, is that the present Assembly charged under the Northern Ireland Act 1982 with two important functions is now discharging neither. As long ago as last December in this House, I warned that if the Assembly continued the suspension of its scrutiny role for long questions about its future would inevitably arise; and on 1 May and 19 May I repeated this warning. On 27 May I invited the leaders of the main parties in the Assembly to discuss with me the position of the present Assembly. The leaders of the two main Unionist parties refused even to talk about it. I regret that I have therefore had to reach my decision without hearing their views.

The decision I have now taken is to lay an order today for the Assembly's dissolution under the powers in section 5(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1982. This order will come before the House for debate under the affirmative procedure. In taking this step I would make the following points. The present Assembly would in any case reach the end of its normal life on 20 October. There would then automatically within six weeks be fresh elections for a new Assembly. The effect of this order is not to abolish the legal basis for an Assembly but simply to dissolve the present Assembly and to leave open the date for a new election for a fresh Assembly.

I wish to emphasise to the House that dissolution of the present Assembly in no way conflicts with our desire for devolved government, nor our commitment to the Anglo-Irish agreement. Devolution remains the Government's preferred option, and I hope that we may see a future Assembly playing a responsible and valuable role in the Province. The sooner that happens, the better.

Meanwhile, the Government remain ready to discuss with all the constitutional parties in Northern Ireland the best way forward. In particular, I would urge the Unionist parties to return to this House to argue their case and to

take up the offer of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to discuss with her the four matters proposed: namely, devolution and the possibility of a round table conference; the future of the Assembly; arrangements for handling Northern Ireland business at Westminster; and new means of consultation between the Government and Unionist leaders.

Only if we are prepared to talk together and discuss these matters can we hope fully to play our separate but complementary roles in building a better future for the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr. Peter Archer (Warley, West): Does the right hon. Gentleman appreciate that his statement will hardly burst on the world as a surprise and will occasion neither joy nor regret? The Assembly was

"A maid whom there were none to praise
And very few to love".

As there was no one left who both attended and used it for the purpose for which it was established, it is only seemly that it should be laid to rest in peace, and on another occasion we can pay tribute to those who at least tried.

Does the right hon. Gentleman appreciate that missing from his statement is any positive proposal either for the immediate future or for the longer term? As he reminded us, the Assembly, when it functioned, played a role in scrutinising the Northern Ireland policies that came before the House. Has he now grasped that that role must be assumed more effectively by the House? Will he consider how to make greater use of the Northern Ireland Committee? Can he persuade the Government's business managers to treat Northern Ireland business less contemptuously and to arrange debates at less bleak hours?

More importantly, does the right hon. Gentleman understand that the people of Northern Ireland will see his statement as pronouncing the obsequies on yet another institution which they were once told offered hope? Where are they now to turn for that?

Will there not be those who seek to represent the expiry of the Assembly as a consequence of the Anglo-Irish agreement? The people of Northern Ireland will consider it worth the price if the agreement makes a measurable contribution to their livelihoods, environment, community services and civil liberties. If those benefits are seen to arise from discussions and co-operation between North and South, Catholic and Protestant, may not the people themselves denounce the bickerings of their politicians?

When the House debates the matter more fully, will the Secretary of State, if he can, give an account of the positive side of the balance sheet, or, if not, give an indication of how long we must wait? If people cry for bread and they are given a stone, can we be surprised if they turn in despair to the demagogues, the bullies and the witch doctors?

Mr. King: It is true that my statement can hardly come as a surprise, because I gave the clearest warnings that, if the Assembly did not discharge the functions for which it was set up, its continuation would obviously be brought into question. That is precisely what has happened.

It would be unfortunate if it were not recognised that I regard this very much as a lost opportunity because—certainly in respect of the scrutiny role—there is no doubt that the Assembly and its various committees were doing some useful work. I especially regret that the decision was made to discontinue those responsibilities.

[Mr. King]

The right hon. and learned Gentleman spoke about the way in which Northern Ireland business is handled in the House. The Government have made clear their readiness to sit down and talk. The Government are often accused of not having enough consultation. I hope that we can sit down with all parties in the House, and with those who ought to be here and are not present in the numbers that they should be, to discuss ways in which we might meet those concerns.

I must correct the right hon. and learned Gentleman in one important aspect. I was in no sense pronouncing obsequies on the Assembly. I was making clear that this Assembly is no longer fulfilling a useful function, but I hope that it will be possible to see a new Assembly which can move forward on a new basis.

Mr. Julian Amery (Brighton, Pavilion): I hope that I shall not embarrass my right hon. Friend by expressing my support for the decision he has just announced. Would he be gracious enough to acknowledge that a number of his right hon. and hon. Friends kept the House up late at night warning that the Assembly would not work? In saying, "We told you so," may I express the hope that he and his colleagues will pay rather more attention to our views on Northern Ireland policy than they have hitherto?

Mr. King: I hope that I can assure my right hon. Friend that I shall contain my embarrassment at that expression of support. I shall, of course, wish to take his views fully into account with the respect that I know he would wish to receive.

Mr. J. Enoch Powell (South Down): Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that in 1982 the two main Unionist parties, as they were then represented in the House, opposed the legislation establishing this Assembly with all the resources that parliamentary procedure admitted? Will he acknowledge that the judgment of those Conservative Members who supported us in our endeavour to prevent that mistake being made has been validated by the statement he has now found it necessary to make?

Mr. King: I do not agree with the right hon. Gentleman, precisely for the reasons I gave in part of my answer to the right hon. and learned Member for Warley, West (Mr. Archer). I think that the Assembly proved that it could discharge a useful role. It is important that people in Northern Ireland should feel that they have much more of an immediate say in the administration of the Province. I say that as somebody who, under the present structure, exercises a degree of power and authority which, in a democracy, raises difficult issues. I would much rather see a situation in which there was greater authority and responsibility for those in the Province. It is unfortunate that the actions of some members of the Unionist parties have prevented the Assembly from discharging its proper functions, but I hope that we will see a day when that can be done.

Sir John Biggs-Davison (Epping Forest): Since the abolition of the Northern Ireland Parliament we have had about as many short-lived successive assemblies as in the French revolution. May I ask whether Her Majesty's Government will now declare a moratorium on assemblies and on political initiatives, including the Intergovernmental Conference, and concentrate on the

conduct of parliamentary business as befits a Province of the United Kingdom and the good government, administration and local government of Northern Ireland?

Mr. King: My hon. Friend would not necessarily expect me to agree with all that he has said. However, I welcome the fact that he is prepared to express his views and argue for them, and I welcome the opportunity, which I have from time to time, to discuss them with him. I hope that he will join me in urging everybody who is interested in the affairs of the Province to come forward and have the confidence to argue their views as well. That must be the right approach, and I hope that the House will support me on that.

Mr. Ian Gow (Eastbourne): Does my right hon. Friend accept the paradox between his announcement of the suspension, if not the death, of the Assembly, one of the principal tasks of which was to present proposals for devolution for the Province, and the passage in his statement in which he said that the preferred choice of the Government was still devolution? Would he acknowledge that, even if that is the preferred solution of the Government today, he will not exclude from his consideration the fact that we should govern Northern Ireland in the way in which we govern other parts of this kingdom?

Mr. King: That begs many questions which need considerably more discussion. Obviously we would seek to govern Northern Ireland as fairly, equally and impartially as we seek to govern every part of the United Kingdom. However, to suggest that that involves total harmonisation of every structure of government flies in the face of experience and practice of the present situation. What it does emphasise—I say this fairly to my hon. Friend and I pay tribute to him because I know that he disagrees with the policies we have recently pursued and honourably took the course that he did in the matter—is that he is prepared to stand up and argue his views. Above all, at present we need people in Northern Ireland who are prepared to have the courage to argue their case in debate and not to fly from this Chamber. They should be prepared to come here and argue for what they believe is the best way forward. That is what I hope to see, and I know that my hon. Friend will support me on that.

Mr. John Hume (Foyle): I can hardly shed any tears over the Secretary of State's announcement today, which is long overdue. I simply repeat our willingness as a party to accept his invitation to sit down and discuss with the Unionist parties devolution or any other matter pertaining to peace and stability in Northern Ireland. Since Unionists in Northern Ireland seem to fear the future more than anything else, the SDLP would welcome the opportunity to talk to them and explain and set out in detail its strategy and view of the future. We would like to hear from them what in that strategy in any way threatens the people they represent and we would also like to hear, for a change, their view of the future.

Mr. King: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his comments. He will have noted in my statement my regret about the previous attitude of the SDLP. Perhaps part of the reason for the statement today goes back to the failure of his party to take part at that time. Therefore, it is certainly an advance in the sense that there might be an opportunity for all the constitutional parties in Northern Ireland to be prepared to sit down and talk constructively.

To cover a point that perhaps I did not answer in the question of my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Gow), that is perhaps part of the reason why it is worth making a further attempt to try to achieve devolved government.

Sir Adam Butler (Bosworth): Does my right hon. Friend accept, from my experience as a Minister on the receiving end, that the Assembly did some valuable work in fulfilling its scrutinising role? Does he also agree that perhaps the main lesson from the demise of the Assembly is that if there are those who refuse to participate in the constitutional processes available to them, it serves only to give heart and encouragement to the men of violence? As long as the Unionists continue their boycott on similar lines, they will not only do no good to themselves but will push the peaceful resolution of the Northern Ireland problem further away?

Mr. King: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, especially with his experience of Northern Ireland, for the tribute he paid to the work done by the Assembly in its scrutinising role. It was a great pity that it chose to discontinue that role. I certainly agree that if a vacuum is left because of people's inability to sit down and discuss the problems frankly and openly and try to find a way forward, traditional to our parliamentary democracy, by argument and debate, it will be a dangerous vacuum into which others may walk.

Mr. Stephen Ross (Isle of Wight): Is the Secretary of State aware that, unlike many Conservative Members who have spoken so far, we share his disappointment at the demise of the Assembly but think that in the circumstances he has taken the right decision? Is he further aware that we share his hope that we will see a new devolved Assembly with all parties of good will serving in it? That is the only way in which the economy of the people of Northern Ireland can be put on better lines. Is not now the time to set up a parliamentary tier between this House and Dublin?

Mr. King: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his opening comments. Some hon. Members seek no initiative, but to preserve the status quo. I find it unsatisfactory to have nothing between the Secretary of State and local authorities, the powers of which are not much in excess of a parish council. *[Interruption.]* That problem may be tackled in a number of different ways. I make no apology to the House for repeating that what is true, above all, is that we shall not begin to find the best solution unless people are prepared to sit down and talk the problem through. The present position is not a long-term solution. I regret the announcement that I have had to make today, but I hope it may provide the opportunity for discussions to start soon on a better way for the people of Northern Ireland to have more say in the administration of the Province. We are certainly willing to consider ways in which there could be a better interchange with the Republic.

Mr. Michael McNair-Wilson (Newbury): Bearing in mind that the chance of the Assembly being revived in the near future is small, is this not the ideal moment to set up the Royal Commission, which should perhaps have been set up in 1980, to consider the structure of local government in Northern Ireland? When considering that, will my right hon. Friend also bear in mind that local government in Northern Ireland has always been unequal

when compared with the rest of the United Kingdom, and that that way forward would not be obstructed by the road block created by politicians who refuse to get together?

Mr. King: At present I have no proposals for that particular approach. I would rather see direct discussions taking place. I appreciate that my hon. Friend has once again made a constructive proposal in an attempt to see a way forward in this matter. That must be the right approach. There is a range of different ways. Although I am not instinctively inclined to his suggestion, I recognise that it is a serious proposition.

Mr. Alfred Dubs (Battersea): While I understand the reasons for the Secretary of State's statement this afternoon, may I urge him to resist as forcibly as possible the blandishments of Conservative Members below the Gangway that a do nothing policy is best for Northern Ireland? What does he intend to do about the Anglo-Irish parliamentary tier? We have raised that matter on many occasions and time and again the Government have said that it is a matter for the House. The right hon. Gentleman knows, and we know, that it not possible for us to make any progress unless he backs that proposal. I urge him to do so and to give us a date when we can get on with the task of establishing the parliamentary tier, which is part of the agreement and is a desirable feature of the relationships between Britain and both parts of Ireland.

Mr. King: I have never regarded any comment from my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Mr. McNair-Wilson) as a blandishment. His serious interest in these matters could never be described as such. I know that the hon. Gentleman does not want me to give this answer, but the parliamentary tier must be a matter for the House to consider. I know that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House has made that position clear.

Viscount Cranborne (Dorset, South): Does my right hon. Friend accept that the spirit in which the Assembly was introduced to the House was the same spirit in which the Anglo-Irish agreement was introduced? Is there any guarantee that the agreement will not suffer the same fate as the Assembly? Is not a more sensible approach—this has been suggested to my right hon. Friend several times this afternoon—to pursue parliamentary forms of government in Northern Ireland? In that context, will he consider setting up or advising the setting up of a Northern Ireland Grand Committee?

Mr. King: I see no similarity between those two items. These matters can be looked at seriously. We have made clear our willingness to consider the arrangements in the House, but we must also consider the administration of government in the Province. It is a great fallacy to assume that one can simply change the arrangements in this House in isolation, without also considering the arrangements for administration in the Province. At present very little lies between Ministers in the Northern Ireland Office and councils, most of which sadly are not meeting, and which have little more power than parish councils. We must consider the totality of the problem.

Mr. Robert Parry (Liverpool, Riverside): Does the Secretary of State believe that the statement today will help to reduce violence in the Province, bearing in mind that we are now fast approaching the marching season?

Mr. King: It is widely recognised in the Province, and by many responsible politicians, that, sadly, the present

[Mr. King]

Assembly is no longer discharging a useful function and that it is not helpful in present circumstances. Many of those who believe in devolution and the concept of an Assembly think that the state of the present Assembly is a positive blockage to considering the form of a new and effective Assembly and how it could work. I hope that that will be recognised. I see no reason why the absence of the Assembly should lead to an increase in tension, especially as it was about to go into recess for the summer.

Mr. Nicholas Budgen (Wolverhampton, South-West): Will my right hon. Friend undertake to issue a White Paper so that the House may be reassured that the aggressive English liberals in both the Northern Ireland Office and the Foreign Office will not attempt a similar expensive, dangerous and destabilising experiment, at any rate within the next decade?

Mr. King: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the typically unperjorative way in which he puts his question. I do not want to issue a White Paper now precisely because I want first to hear the views of those most involved. Rather than trying to lay down the matter in tablets of stone, at this stage, I should like to talk to people and hear their views. In the absence of any contribution from those who have been elected to represent the people in the Province and in their continuing refusal to express any views whatever on behalf of their constituents, we may have to consider a step such as that suggested by my hon. Friend.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Is not the fallacy of the argument advanced by many Conservative Members today that Northern Ireland is just like any other part of the United Kingdom? Was not the signing of the Anglo-Irish agreement a recognition by the Government that Northern Ireland is indeed different? It is about time that Conservative Members recognised that position. If the Unionists continue their present tactics of obstruction, boycotting the House, and so on, will not many people come to the same sort of conclusion as that illustrated in the question by the hon. Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry) to the Prime Minister today — namely, that many people will get so fed up with Northern Ireland and its problems and with the refusal of politicians to accept any possible agreement that they will shrug off the problem and conclude, on balance, that there is no positive role for Britain to play?

Mr. King: That would be a tragic and defeatist approach to the genuine problems that exist in Northern Ireland and a betrayal of all those who live there, who are part of the United Kingdom and who are entitled to good government. Obviously, all parts of the United Kingdom are not identical. The many areas, while all being part of the United Kingdom, are different. The arrangements in the House for handling Scottish affairs are different and the arrangements in Northern Ireland are different. I make no apology for emphasising that point.

Sir Eldon Griffiths (Bury St. Edmunds): I agree with my right hon. Friend that a properly elected democratic Assembly is an essential part of the local government of the Province, but may I ask for his assurance that it is in the best interests of the Union that until civil peace is restored in Northern Ireland, there can be no devolution

of responsibility for the enforcement of the law, the administration of justice and the upholding of internal security?

Mr. King: I should like to make it absolutely clear that we support the point made by my hon. Friend. There could clearly be no question of devolution on those matters unless there was a considerable basis of confidence, perhaps at an earlier stage with experience of devolved administration in other areas more traditionally associated with devolved government.

Mr. Merlyn Rees (Morley and Leeds, South): In the face of a divided Northern Ireland, where 2,500 people have died and more than 30,000 have been injured by the violence and where the Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) Act has been in force for 10 or 12 years, does the Secretary of State accept that to continue to talk about devolution is a pipe dream and, equally, to talk about integration is also a pipe dream? If both sides in Northern Ireland will not sit down and talk with the Secretary of State—I wish that they would—they should be asked to sit down together without hon. Members being present and, if nothing results from that—which is likely—we should completely reassess our policy towards Northern Ireland. Perhaps only that thought will concentrate the minds of people in the Province.

Mr. King: The House respects the right hon. Gentleman's considerable experience on these matters. I listened carefully to his comments. He has had experience along this path and knows the difficulties that exist. It might be fair to say that the concentration of minds to which he referred at the end of his question, has followed in part after the Anglo-Irish agreement. In the coming months it might be possible to see more interest in the idea of sitting down and talking.

It is true that those matters upon which agreement could be reached would be removed, and the Anglo-Irish agreement would cease to operate on those points. There is, therefore, clearly an interest among those parties opposed to the Anglo-Irish agreement to see whether certain matters can be removed from the ambit of the agreement.

Mr. James Prior (Waveney): Is my right hon. Friend aware that for those of us who have a deep and abiding commitment to all the people of Northern Ireland, this afternoon's announcement must come as a disappointment? Is he further aware that others, like myself, do not believe that integration is the answer to the problem? In the United Kingdom's interests there must be devolved government some time in Northern Ireland, if not now. The SDLP more than any other party, which has achieved significant success through the Anglo-Irish agreement, should play its part by helping to bring about an Assembly in Northern Ireland. That would be a great advantage to the unionists, because the more the Assembly could do, the less the Anglo-Irish agreement would have to operate. Does that not afford some way forward? Is it not right that the House should always seek some way forward to resolve a problem which is not new, will not go away, and which it is our duty to solve?

Mr. King: I am grateful for my right hon. Friend's comments. I share the feeling of sadness at the necessity of having to make the announcement today. I understand that the concept that he launched was well worth pursuing

and had shown merit. It was a tragedy that the SDLP did not take part, and that posed difficulties. I know that the hon. Member for Foyle (Mr. Hume) understands why my right hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Mr. Prior) made the comments that he did. I hope that the idea launched by my right hon. Friend will be carried forward in a new form in future.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I appreciate the interest of the House in these matters. However, there is pressing business to come. I shall allow questions to continue for another seven minutes, after which we must proceed to the next business. I hope by then that all hon. Members will have been called—if they speak briefly.

Mr. Jerry Hayes (Harlow): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is regrettable that the House has heard some distasteful crowing about his announcement this afternoon? People should be looking to the future. Perhaps this drastic measure—which will be debated on another day—might concentrate the minds of all parties in Northern Ireland and force them to sit down and negotiate. That is the only way to keep the peace in the Province.

Mr. King: It is clear that we must make progress. The danger is that people talk about slogans—and perhaps I am guilty of this also—about devolution or integration, and they do not consider the problem as a whole—the relationship of this House with the Province and the problems of the Province's administration. We must consider the totality of these problems and find a basis on which we can go forward which will command the widest possible acceptance among people in the Province. We know the difficulties. We realise that so far that has been unachievable. The House must try to find the correct approach. I will try to do that.

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): Does my right hon. Friend accept that by raising even now the spectre of devolution at some future date, he is turning his face away from the only lesson that can be learnt from the inevitable demise of the Assembly—that devolution in Northern Ireland will never work? It will never work because neither the minority community nor a United Kingdom Government will accept that the ballot box in Northern Ireland will always, for the foreseeable future, produce a Unionist majority. Faced with those inevitable facts, can he say whether there is a realistic way forward, other than the integration, on suitable terms, of the Province into the local government and parliamentary structure?

Mr. King: My hon. Friend glides easily with a wave of the wand from the problems of achieving devolution to integration, as if that was immediately achievable on some acceptable basis. He greatly underestimates the problems that that would pose. I have made it clear, and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has made it clear to the Unionist leaders, that, while we remain committed to the principle of devolution, we are also prepared to consider the ways in which Northern Ireland business is handled in this House. These matters require serious discussion. I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls) will lend his shoulder to the wheel and try to get people to join in these discussions.

Mr. John Mark Taylor (Solihull): Does my right hon. Friend agree that if Northern Ireland is to be governed in the same way as the rest of the United Kingdom, as many

Unionists would urge, one of the first requirements must be to have county councils or a provincial council? Does he accept that he has now abolished the elected Assembly which could have adopted that role? If he were to use the introduction of county councils or provincial government as a point of departure, what guarantee is there that everyone will sit in the chamber?

Mr. King: That is the point that I was making. My hon. Friend has understood the point that the present Assembly comes to the end of its life on 20 October, at the end of its four-year term. However, it has ceased to discharge the functions for which it was set up. There is no question but that the Assembly could have moved on in the direction that my hon. Friend has mentioned. I hope that we can have discussions to discover whether it is possible to move in any way along the lines that my hon. Friend has described.

Mr. John Stokes (Halesowen and Stourbridge): Will my right hon. Friend be assured that, in spite of the natural and inevitable impatience in England about affairs in Ireland, many English people hold the Province in great esteem? They remember its wonderful contribution in both world wars. The English people wish it well. I believe that our best efforts must be directed towards improving parliamentary and local government in the Province, not to have too many new initiatives here.

Mr. King: Everyone who has had the honour to serve in Northern Ireland would share the comments made by my hon. Friend at the start of his question. Our recognition and appreciation of the quality of the overwhelming majority of the people in the Province is completely unquestioned. That is why we are so committed to trying to find the most acceptable way in which to proceed and to give the people of Northern Ireland as substantial a say as we can in their administration.

Mr. Michael Brown (Brigg and Cleethorpes): Does my right hon. Friend agree that whatever our views on the Northern Ireland Assembly previously, the most important conclusion that any hon. Member representing Northern Ireland should draw from today's announcement is that, whatever their views and however aggrieved they may feel, this is now the central forum for political debate?

Mr. King: One of the comments that may be made about my statement today is that the Government are in some way seeking to choke or close off channels of communication and expression. That charge falls flat when one sees the Benches opposite and realises that one of the most important channels open to anyone in this United Kingdom is this Chamber. Nevertheless, the House is completely neglected and unused by the overwhelming majority of Unionist Members. They are abusing district councils at the same time. They are failing to use the channels that are available to them. I very much agree with my hon. Friend.

Mr. Kenneth Carlisle (Lincoln): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the failure of the Assembly is to be regretted, because it provided a local forum in Northern Ireland where the various parties could try to resolve their differences? Does he also agree that no actions or words in this House can thrust peace on Northern Ireland? Does he accept that peace can be achieved in the Province only if all parties there genuinely wish to talk and reach some accord on future life and prosperity there?

Mr. King: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. There is no doubt that if we are to find a way forward, the people in the Province and their representatives will have to be prepared to come forward and make their contribution.

Mr. Neil Hamilton (Tatton): Is it not clear from the SDLP's attitude to the Assembly and a comparison of that attitude with its attitude to the Anglo-Irish agreement that it is prepared to support Government initiatives only when it calculates that they are likely to weaken the Union? That should be enough to make us view with suspicion any initiatives that it supports. Did not my hon. Friend the Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls) put his finger on the central point about experience in Ulster in the past 16 years? The attempt to reconcile two irreconcilable opposites merely by talking will never succeed. The time has come to allay Unionist fears by moving towards proper integration of the Province, ceasing to govern it as a colonial dependency and treating it properly as part of the United Kingdom?

Mr. King: I am not sure that an agreement which gets the British Government and the Government of the Republic of Ireland to sign an undertaking which was originally given in this House, concerning the rights of the Unionist majority in Northern Ireland, represents consent to the right to dominate. Membership of the United Kingdom is an important safeguard. I do not regard that agreement as weakening the Union in any way. As for integration, I do not have much to add to what I have already said. I am anxious to deal with affairs in the House, and especially to get hon. Members to focus on the real problem of administration in the Province.

Mr. William Cash (Stafford): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the most important thing is to take the politics of Ireland off the streets and into the debating chamber? I have consistently advocated a Select Committee. That would help. Will my right hon. Friend consider it? In such a forum, members of the SDLP, Unionists and others who represent the rest of the United Kingdom could, in a proper constitutional framework, scrutinise legislation in a calm atmosphere, which would, I hope, enable progress to be made.

Mr. King: I am interested in that suggestion. The right hon. Member for South Down (Mr. Powell) made just such a one in the debate on the appropriation order earlier

this week. I confirm that that is the type of matter that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said we would be prepared to discuss.

Mr. Peter Bruinvels (Leicester, East): I accept that the Assembly has been used improperly. It has been used as a political platform against the Anglo-Irish agreement. I have some sympathy with that, but will my right hon. Friend consider the role of the Democratic Unionist party, which has threatened to take politics on to the streets rather than pursue genuine debate? Will he consider the £2.5 million that it costs to run the Assembly? Could it not be better used helping the economy and providing jobs to encourage the people of Northern Ireland who want to remain part of the United Kingdom?

Mr. King: The Democratic Unionists must answer for their own utterances, but I hope that everybody will show responsibility at a time when problems can easily arise in Northern Ireland. One cannot sit back and do nothing if expenditure is being incurred when none of the functions for which it is authorised are being performed. Bearing in mind the state of the Northern Ireland economy, there are several areas where the money could be much better used.

Mr. Stuart Bell (Middlesbrough): Does not the fact that the Assembly is now to be dissolved and there is no progress towards devolution mean that there is an added burden on the Anglo-Irish agreement? Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that, under article 10 of that agreement, there will be a responsibility to promote co-operation between the two parts of Ireland, so there is an additional responsibility on the agreement? Does he also agree that it ill behoves those who do not come to the House to presume that, by their actions in Northern Ireland and laying the Assembly to rest, they can somehow achieve back door integration? Will he confirm that there is nothing mutually exclusive about the Anglo-Irish agreement and round table talks on the future of Northern Ireland without preconditions?

Mr. King: I believe that talks without preconditions must be the way forward. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for making that clear. One component of the Anglo-Irish agreement is the opportunity for the minority to be able to advance its views. In no circumstances was the Anglo-Irish agreement intended to supplant the opportunity for the majority view to be taken into account. The present tragedy is that the majority representatives have chosen to switch themselves off.

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PARLIAMENTARY STATEMENT BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND ON THE NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY 12 JUNE 1986

1. With permission Mr Speaker I wish to make a statement about the Northern Ireland Assembly.
2. Under the Northern Ireland Act 1982 the present Assembly has two functions, firstly to consider and report on how a devolved Northern Ireland administration should be formed. Secondly the Act requires the Assembly to monitor and report on the policies and activities of the Northern Ireland Departments.
3. The task of making proposals on devolution was undoubtedly made much more difficult by the regrettable decision of the SDLP not to take their seats. The Assembly has not been able to come forward with agreed proposals and there is no present prospect of that occurring. As for the monitoring of the Northern Ireland Departments, the Assembly suspended this work on 5 December. In spite of clear warnings about the threat that this action would pose to the continuation of the Assembly, the Unionist parties have not been prepared to resume this function. As a result the Alliance Party withdrew from the Assembly since they believed there was no longer any useful role to be played.
4. On 13 March the Assembly formally resolved not to carry out its monitoring functions, to wind up the Devolution Report Committee and merely to meet one afternoon a week for a debate on aspects of the Anglo-Irish Agreement.
5. The position therefore is that the present Assembly charged under the Northern Ireland Act 1982 with two important functions is now discharging neither. As long ago as last December in this House, I warned that if the Assembly continued the suspension of

its scrutiny role for long, questions about its future would inevitably arise; and on 1 May and 19 May I repeated this warning. On 27 May I invited the leaders of the main parties in the Assembly to discuss with me the position of the present Assembly. The leaders of the two main Unionist parties refused even to talk about it. I regret that I have therefore had to reach my decision without hearing their views.

6. The decision I have now taken is to lay an Order today for the Assembly's dissolution under the powers in Section 5(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1982. This Order will come before the House for debate under the affirmative procedure. In taking this step I would make the following points. The present Assembly would in any case reach the end of its normal life on 20 October. There would then automatically within six weeks be fresh elections for a new Assembly. The effect of this Order is not to abolish the legal basis for an Assembly but simply to dissolve the present Assembly and to leave open the date for a new election for a fresh Assembly.

7. I wish to emphasise to the House that dissolution of the present Assembly in no way conflicts with our desire for devolved government nor our commitment to the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Devolution remains the Government's preferred option and I hope that we may see a future Assembly playing a responsible and valuable role in the Province. The sooner that happens, the better.

8. Meanwhile the Government remains ready to discuss with all the Constitutional parties in Northern Ireland the best way forward. In particular I would urge the Unionist parties to return to this House to argue their case and to take up the offer of my Rt Hon Friend the Prime Minister to discuss with her the four matters proposed, namely devolution and the possibility of a Round Table Conference; the future of the Assembly; arrangements for handling Northern Ireland business at Westminster; and new means of consultation between the Government and unionist leaders.

9. Only if we are prepared to talk together and discuss these matters can we hope fully to play our separate but complementary roles in building a better future for the people of Northern Ireland.