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Northern Ireland Office

Press Notice

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Stormont Castle, Belfast

25 March 1975

THE FOLLOWING STATEMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER, RT HON HAROLD WILSON MP, WAS ISSUED FROM STORMONT CASTLE TODAY, TUESDAY 25 MARCH 1975

I am glad to be in Northern Ireland again at a time when we have an opportunity to secure an end to the terrible violence which has afflicted the Province for so long.

I do not believe that the vast majority of people of Northern Ireland want any part of sectarianism and violence. I believe that they are anxious to seize - and want the Government to seize - the opportunities presented by the ceasefire to start a return to normality and to the settling of differences by debate instead of by the bullet and the bomb.

The road ahead will be long and difficult. There is no overnight solution to deep-rooted problems, no magic formula. Patience, tolerance and goodwill are needed from all sides of the community.

The next step must be to make a success of the Constitutional Convention. The election for the Convention will take place on 1 May. When elected, it will meet under a chairman - Sir Robert Lowry, the Lord Chief Justice of Northern Ireland - of the highest standing, integrity and impartiality. He and the members of the Convention will have the profound good wishes of all those who have a genuine concern for the peace, prosperity and good government of Northern Ireland.

As you know, the Convention will consist of 78 members elected to existing constituencies by the single transferable vote. It will have an initial life

of six months. The Government has the power to submit to referendum in Northern Ireland proposals emerging from the Convention, if this is helpful. The Convention is not an Assembly nor a Parliament; it will neither legislate nor administer.

But it will consider as last June's White Paper said 'what provision for the government of Northern Ireland is likely to command the most widespread acceptance throughout the community there'. The Convention is then required to prepare a report or reports to be laid before Parliament. No solution is excluded.

The Convention will be elected by the people of Northern Ireland. It will meet under an Ulster chairman with Ulster members representing Ulster people. It offers a great chance for people here to work together to produce proposals which can be a major step on the road to a lasting peace.

Such an Ulster solution would be the best solution. Its success is a matter of vital concern to everyone in the British Isles.

The Convention will decide how it should conduct its business. But all the people of the United Kingdom have the right to expect that the Convention should make every effort to agree on recommendations which will command widespread acceptance.

This means that all the people of Northern Ireland - whatever their views - have a duty to put those views forward. For their part, the elected representatives must pay close and searching attention to the opinions of every section of the community.

In turn, the Government, and I believe Parliament, will pay very close heed to the voices of reason and conciliation expressed through the Convention.

Northern Ireland has endured six terrible years. I would like to pay tribute to the role played by the Security Forces, the police and the ordinary law-abiding citizens. We owe a very great debt to their continuing steadfastness and courage. By moving forward now we can repay the debt owed to them.

The problem facing Northern Ireland today is how the people who live here can work out how best to live together and with their neighbours in peace in the interest of all the people. It is a commitment to the solution of this problem which is all important. It means give and take - majorities not seeking to coerce minorities; minorities determined to be constructive.

The people of the United Kingdom as a whole have the right to expect from Northern Ireland that give and take, which applies throughout the rest of the United Kingdom. There are responsibilities as well as rights. This is the best chance to make a new start.

Many solutions have been tried. For one reason or another they broke down, and there is no benefit to anyone to go over the arguments of yesteryear. Perhaps one reason some of them broke down was the feeling in Northern Ireland that they had in some way been imposed on Northern Ireland from outside.

That was why last June I called for a solution to be worked out by the people of Northern Ireland themselves - an Ulster solution. This is why on 1 May you will be yourselves electing a Northern Ireland Convention. It will be your elected representatives who will then put forward a form of government for the peace and reconciliation and the common good of all the people of Northern Ireland.

That is the solution everyone should want and it will be the desire of the Westminster Government in Parliament to do all in our power to make it succeed. But no British Government of any Party, however constituted, no British Parliament would be able to ratify an Ulster constitution which was not balanced and fair to all the people of Northern Ireland.

No British Government can coerce the people of Northern Ireland into a united Ireland against their will. That has been the constant, unchanging view of British Governments of all parties. It is the view of the British Government today.

Nor would the Government be a party to the exclusion of the minority by the majority or to a refusal by the minority to work with the majority. All members of the community have the same right to freedom under the law; all bear the same responsibility to maintain the law.

With those freedoms, with those responsibilities, let us all now work together for the future and for all who live in Northern Ireland.