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**IMMEDIATE**

cc PS/Mr Murphy (B&L)  
Mr Jeffrey  
Mrs Evans, HOLAB  
Mr Kelly  
Mr Stephens  
Mr Beeton  
Mr Brooker  
Mr Canavan  
Miss Wooldridge  
Mr Webb  
Mr Travis

PS/SECRETARY OF STATE (B&L)

**NORTHERN IRELAND BILL: THIRD READING**

1. I attach a 'padded' set of speaking notes. Much of this is dreadful penny a line stuff which the Secretary of State will rightly delete and replace, if considerations of time require, with something better. At least it might be an inspiration.

**A J Whysall**

**NORTHERN IRELAND BILL: COMMONS****REVISED NOTES FOR THIRD READING SPEECH**

- Grateful for the **overwhelming support** the House has shown for the Bill, following on from the **substantial backing for the Agreement in Northern Ireland itself**. Once the Bill is finally approved, the requirement of the Triple Lock, that successive Governments agreed should apply to any settlement, will be satisfied.

*Progress in the last year*

- This Bill is the culmination of a **great deal of Northern Ireland business** we have put before the House this year. It is worth reviewing the key developments, to see how much the Northern Ireland political landscape, which is the context in which this Bill will operate, has changed in 12 months.
- This time last year, the talks were still deadlocked on the **decommissioning** question. They had not addressed their substantive agenda. They began it only in October.
- Once they did begin, we saw an **accelerating pace of negotiation**.
- It culminated in the **sleepless nights of the Spring**, and the **Agreement of Good Friday**.
- Since then:
  - we have had a **referendum**;
  - we have had **Assembly elections**;
  - the Assembly has elected its **First Minister and Deputy First Minister-designate**;



- we have established a **Policing Commission**, and a **Criminal Justice Review**;
- the **Sentences Act** has been passed;
- we have acted on our **commitments on the Irish language**;
- and now the House has considered, and I hope will shortly approve, **this Bill**. It is major piece of constitutional legislation, which we have prepared in record time. We have been happy to acknowledge its imperfections as introduced, while still taking some pride in it. It is, we believe, an essentially sound framework for the Agreement institutions to operate in.

#### *Tributes*

- The result of the last year's efforts is that **Northern Ireland's future is, potentially, transformed**. The groundwork is laid for a more peaceful, harmonious, prosperous future where people can go about their ordinary lives untroubled by the evils that have afflicted them in recent years. **Nothing is guaranteed; but the opportunity is there** as it was not before.
- Creating that opportunity has required **dogged effort by many people**; it has required great **courage, vision and commitment**. I pay tribute here:
  - first, to the **talks participants** themselves: they were ultimately willing to bridge the differences between them, honourably, but inevitably taking risks, losing friends and subjecting themselves to allegations of betrayal;
  - we have seen further instances of that courage in the way the **First Minister and Deputy First Minister have gone about their work**;

- pay tribute also to the **talks Chairmen**; and to
  - my **ministerial colleagues**, especially the **Prime Minister**, for his enormous commitment of time and energy; and equally to the **Taoiseach**, whose dedication to the success of the process, especially at a time of bereavement, will be long remembered;
  - but perhaps most of all I pay tribute to those **many people in Northern Ireland** who, though they found a things in the Agreement that were distasteful, nevertheless made the **leap of imagination necessary to see it was the only sensible way forward**.
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- We of course **respect the doubts** that have been expressed about the Agreement within the House and outside. Those who doubt have often shown courage too. But believe **people are ever more widely coming to the view**, whatever their original reservations, that the Agreement must be made to work.

*The Government's commitment: continued effort, listening to all shades of opinion...*

- This Government will go on doing all it can to ensure the Agreement comes successfully into operation, in all its aspects.
- In doing that, we will **listen to all shades of opinion**, for the Agreement or against it. We will of course **work very closely with the new authorities established in Northern Ireland**.



*... and especially on the Bill*

- Those comments apply to the Bill, just as they do to other preparations for the Agreement to come into effect. We are anxious that the Bill should both
  - **reflect the Agreement as faithfully as possible, and**
  - **within its terms, provide the most effective and flexible machinery possible.**
- We have always declared our **willingness to look at provisions of the Bill** to achieve those objectives. As a result:
  - We made **changes before introduction** of the basis of consultation.
  - We have made **further substantial changes at Committee and Report.**
- So, to take a few examples, we:
  - **omitted a number of sections in the consultation draft that were questioned**, for example on default powers of the Secretary of State;
  - made the **criteria for exclusion of ministers and parties tighter**, consistently with the Agreement;
  - **sharpened many of the Human Rights provisions**, so that for example all Assembly Bills now go to the Human Rights Commission, the Commission advises the Assembly as well as the Secretary of State, the appointment criteria for Commissioners reflected better the Agreement text;
  - **made clearer the scrutiny role of Assembly committees**, in line with the Agreement.

- We have **gone on listening** during the debates in this House.
- We shall **reflect over the summer** on a number of the points made in the House, for example:
  - on the **Human Rights provisions**, to see if there are further ways in which the Bill can, consistently with the Agreement, be strengthened;
  - on **criteria for early dissolution**, and for **prorogation**, of the Assembly;
  - on some of the **Order in Council-making** powers;
  - on **audit arrangements**, the importance of which was brought home to us in a series of very cogent contributions to the debates, by the right hon member for Haltemprice and Howden.
- We cannot promise anything, but we will look at these and other areas carefully, and with an open mind.
- [My hon friend the Minister of State is] already arranging a **further round of discussions in September** with parties represented here and in the Assembly, when we shall discuss these and other concerns. We shall then **bring forward any necessary amendments in another place**.
- The politicians of Northern Ireland will have to work the Bill. **We want it to be, as far as possible, their Bill.**



*Peroration*

- Thank colleagues for their forbearance in accommodating the lengthy discussion of this Bill at such a late stage, and for the hard work they have put into it.
- Thank them too for the **civilised tone of the debate**, even where feelings were very strong. This bodes well for the future.
- ✓ • We all need rest, after the intensive work of recent months. I admire the vigour shown by colleagues in all parts of the House.
- But there is a **great deal of work ahead for the parties represented in the Assembly**, which will start before we meet again in this place to consider the Bill. I am sure **we wish them all well** in their endeavours.