

Orders of the Day

Police (Northern Ireland) Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

45 pm

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office
Mr. Adam Ingram: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The aim of the Bill is to make the policing of Northern Ireland more efficient, more effective, more accountable and, as a result, more acceptable, thereby commanding increased confidence across the whole community.

As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said on his first visit to Northern Ireland, on 16 May, shortly after leaving office:

"We want to increase public confidence in policing through measured reform based on the Hayes Report on the complaints system and last year's consultation paper on structural change".

That statement set out the Government's stall on the issue of policing within Northern Ireland.

Indeed, in April 1996, when in opposition, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, with the support of the Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Clydebank and Milngavie (Mr. Worthington), published a comprehensive consultative document on the future of policing in Northern Ireland. What we are dealing with today draws heavily on that document. It should come as no surprise to anyone that the Government are determined to push forward with the principles and structures laid down in the Bill.

As a Government, we are resolute in seeking to build on the strengths of the Royal Ulster Constabulary by putting in place new mechanisms to increase its efficiency, effectiveness, accountability and acceptability. It had been the Government's intention to proceed with our proposals through the Order in Council procedures. Strong representations were received on that point from political parties, the Police Authority, the Police Federation and others that, given the nature of the measures in the Bill, it would be more appropriate to deal with the matter through a full Bill placed before both Houses of Parliament. As a result of those representations, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister agreed that it would be proceeded with in that way, and I am grateful to my right hon. Friends who are responsible for the business management of the House for finding an early slot to introduce the Bill.

The purpose of the Bill is wide ranging and, I believe, vital to the better policing of Northern Ireland. It is an objective to which the Chief Constable, the RUC and the Police Authority constantly aspire. Many changes for the better have been introduced over the years. The Bill makes that process of constructive and developing change a major step forward.

In essence, the Bill has four main strands. First, it clarifies the relative responsibilities of the Chief Constable, of the Police Authority and of the Secretary of State in the governance of policing in Northern Ireland, otherwise known as the tripartite structure. Secondly, it introduces measures to enable the wholly independent investigation of complaints against the police in Northern Ireland by establishing the office of the police ombudsman for Northern Ireland.

Thirdly, the Bill introduces a range of measures intended to make the RUC and the police authority more accountable. Fourthly, it consolidates existing Northern Ireland policing legislation, with the exception of police and criminal evidence provisions.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I know that the Minister appreciates that there are concerns in Northern Ireland about policing developments. Has his attention been drawn to the fact that about 15 people awaited the delegation when it arrived back from Downing street on Thursday, and that one suspects that they may not have been other than armed? Is that an extension of the policing that some people would like in Northern Ireland?

Mr. Ingram: The hon. Gentleman will understand that I should not comment on individual cases. If he has evidence of law breaking, he—as a citizen of Northern Ireland—has a responsibility to report it to the RUC. I have taken note of his point and I will take the issue on board.

Before I describe the detail of the Bill's provisions, I should like to pay tribute to the work of those who will be most directly affected by them. I should mention first the officers—the men and women—of the RUC. There is no question but that, over the past 28 years, they have made great sacrifices—including, for some, the ultimate sacrifice of life itself—to safeguard civil society in Northern Ireland from the evils of terrorism. The figures speak for themselves: 301 officers have lost their lives because of terrorist attacks; many thousands more have been injured; and all officers, and their families, have had to live with the constant danger of terrorism.

I know that members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary take great pride in the force's record and in the fact that, despite the threat of terrorism, which remains, they continue to commit themselves to providing a community police service for all the people of Northern Ireland. The Bill's proposals will aid them in that task.

As a police service, the RUC faces unique and all too often extremely dangerous circumstances as its officers go about their daily duties. On Saturday, that fact was brought sharply into focus yet again, in Derry. Once again, the RUC was caught in the middle of the need to uphold the rights of those who wished to march in recognition of their community traditions and a section of the other community that was determined to deny that right.

In a clearly orchestrated and deliberate attempt to create maximum civil disorder, RUC officers were subjected to a torrent of petrol bombs—totalling more than 1,000. Five RUC officers were injured—thankfully, none of them seriously—as they did their duty, at the risk of their lives, to protect life and property.

The conduct and actions of those who carry out such attacks threaten the very fabric of society and undermine all the good work of those, from both sides of the community, who are working so hard to provide a better future for Derry, for the north-west and for Northern Ireland as a whole. Those who took the actions have no place in a democratic society and should be universally condemned—including by those who claim to uphold the principles of democracy and non-violence as enshrined in the Mitchell principles.

No one should seek to find any excuse for the riotous behaviour that Derry suffered on Saturday night, and those who participated in it should ask themselves