

STATE PAPERS: NORTHERN IRELAND

Year of political stalemate in which 80 people were killed



In 1978 Troubles atrocities including the Provisional IRA's bombing of the La Mon House hotel. The Republican 'dirty protest' in the H-blocks intensified and there were concerns about the treatment of prisoners in Castlereagh interrogation centre. There was some good news, however short

lived, when it was announced that US businessman John de Lorean was to establish a sports car plant in west Belfast.

Dr Eamon Phoenix reports on state papers released under the 30-year rule

THE year 1978 in the north was marked by political stalemate as the United Unionist coalition insisted on a return to the old Stormont and the Labour secretary of state, the pugnacious ex-miner Roy Mason, signalled a shift away from Sunningdale-type power-sharing.

The SDLP and the Irish government suspected that Mr Mason, like the Tory opposition under Margaret Thatcher, was promoting 'integration' by the back door.

The year was still young on the evening of Friday February 17 when three members of the Provisional IRA attached two massive firebombs to the security grilles of the La Mon House hotel near Belfast.

The warning came too late and a huge fireball engulfed the dining room where 400 people were attending a function. Twelve died and 23 suffered horrific injuries.

The atrocity unleashed a wave of revulsion throughout Ireland.

However, relations between Mr Mason and Jack Lynch's Fianna Fail government were not improved by the secretary of state's claim that the bombers might have found sanctuary in the Republic.

The British were angry over Lynch's demand for an "ordered withdrawal" from the north and his hint at an amnesty for republican prisoners.

The La Mon bombing was followed by a determined military offensive against the IRA and in February Gerry Adams was charged with IRA membership, only to be cleared six months later.

In June 1978 the Provisionals am-

bushed an RUC patrol near Crossmaglen, killing one constable and kidnapping Constable William Turbitt.

In retaliation loyalists kidnapped Fr Hugh Murphy, an RAF chaplain, from his home at Ahoghill.

The kidnappers said they would return the priest in the same condition as the missing RUC man.

Following appeals from Protestant churchmen, including Ian Paisley, Fr Murphy was released unharmed. Mr Turbitt's body was later found in Armagh.

The republican 'dirty protest' in the H blocks against the abolition of special category status escalated with Archbishop Tomas O Fiaich making a high-profile visit to the Maze in August and branding conditions there as "inhuman".

The British government was determined to stand firm. Mason told prime minister Jim Callaghan that any concession would push them down "the slippery slope towards political status" – a view supported by all parties at Westminster.

As the campaign intensified the Provos shot dead Albert Miles, deputy governor of the Maze, at his north Belfast home in November.

1978 was the year that allegations of RUC ill-treatment of suspects at Castlereagh holding centre reached crisis point, fuelling a damning report by Amnesty International in June.

As a result the government was forced to establish the Bennett Inquiry which confirmed maltreatment and forced London to introduce safeguards.

In November a leaked military intelligence report saw no prospect of



■ **MODERN HISTORY:** Some of the state papers relating to the north released today by the British government

the Provo campaign ending in the next five years but rejected the view that IRA members were "mindless hooligans drawn from the unemployed and unemployable".

Unemployment remained a major problem, running at 11.4 per cent against only 6.1 in the Britain.

This year saw the publication of a major fair employment report which showed that Catholics were under-represented in the manufacturing sector and public service.

A secret Stormont report described Belfast as "an ailing city", blighted by violence, poor housing and marked population decline, especially in loyalist areas.

In August Mr Mason announced that US businessman John de Lorean planned to establish a sports car plant in west Belfast, although there were doubts about its viability.

The death toll from the Troubles was 81 with 755 shootings and 633 bombings.

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■ **More from the 1978 state papers relating to Northern Ireland in tomorrow's Irish News**

Death throes of west Belfast electronics firm

AN electronics firm which it was hoped would help a deprived area of west Belfast was in deep trouble by 1978.

Strathearn Audio had been established in Kennedy Way in 1974 but an article in an international electronics

review in February 1978 predicted the firm's demise due to poor technology, stagnant orders and a weak skills base.

According to the article those engaged at Strathearn "were just not sufficiently skilled to produce a

marketable product". A total of £13.6 millions of public money had been lost on the project to date but "there was political pressure" on the British government to continue to subsidise it. This news of a possible

partnership with the Japanese company AIWA influenced secretary of state Roy Mason to ask the chief secretary to the treasury Joel Barnett on July 3 1978 for a further £830,000. "My view is that, having supported the company thus

far it would be foolish if we were to withdraw support at this point," he wrote. In his reply to Mason three days later Mr Barnett strongly disagreed with the secretary of state's views. Pointing out that the Treasury had already

funded the project to the tune of £9 million he wrote: "It seems to me that you have shown all the political good will possible by keeping it going since last November and that the time has now come to cut our losses".