

POLICE (LISTOWEL).

HC Deb 14 July 1920 Vol 131 cc2385-91 [2386](#)

Mr. T. P. O'CONNOR

I desire to repeat a question which at the request of the Chief Secretary I postponed on Monday, namely, what information he can give the House in regard to certain incidents in the Listowel police force and the speech attributed to Commissioner Smyth?

Sir H. GREENWOOD

Before I answer this question may I express my regret if I said anything which may have seemed unfair in answer to the supplementary question of the hon. and gallant Gentleman Sir F. Hall? I quite understand that any criticism against anything done in Ireland must be directed against me, and I receive a good deal of it. May I further say I am very jealous of the honour and courage of this gallant force which in depleted strength and badly equipped is doing its best to uphold the honour and the instructions of this House?

The "recent events" to which my hon. Friend refers presumably relate to the resignation of five Royal Irish Constabulary constables who were stationed at Listowel, in the county of Kerry. On the 19th of June last, the Divisional Commissioner, Colonel Smyth, met the members of the force, 18 in number, stationed at Listowel. My attention has been called to a report in certain newspapers of a speech alleged to have been delivered on this occasion by Colonel Smyth. On the face of it, the report appears to have been supplied by the five constables already mentioned. I have myself seen Colonel Smyth, and he repudiates the accuracy of the statements contained in this report. He informs me that the instructions that were given by him to the police in Listowel and throughout the division were those that were stated in the Debate in this House on the 22nd of June last by the Attorney-General for Ireland, and that he did not exceed these instructions. The reason for the resignations of these five constables was their refusal to take up their duties in certain barracks in a disturbed part of the county of Kerry. They had taken up this attitude before the date of Colonel Smyth's visit. I am satisfied that the newspaper report referred to gives a distorted and wholly misleading account of what took place.

At the end of Questions—

4.0 P.M.

Mr. T. P. O'CONNOR

I beg to ask leave to move the Adjournment of the House to discuss a definite matter of urgent public importance, namely, "the recent incident in the Listowel police office, and the remarks attributed to Commissioner Smyth as calculated to produce serious bloodshed in Ireland."

Mr. SPEAKER

I have considerable hesitation in accepting that. As the gentleman to whom those remarks are attributed repudiates the accuracy of them, I do not think I should be justified in accepting the Motion.

Mr. MacVEAGH

Are you aware that the charges brought against this Divisional Commissioner have been subscribed to by fourteen policemen, who state that this was a speech delivered by the Divisional Commissioner, and having regard to that, is it to be seriously argued that the House of Commons is not to be allowed to discuss the speech simply because the man implicated denied that the report is an accurate one? How are we to know to what extent that denial applies? The speech was reported in the newspapers. What part does he contradict and what part does he admit? Is the House of Commons not to ascertain whether a man occupying a responsible position in the administration of the country and at the very head of the Police Force is entitled to incite to murder and assassination?

Mr. SPEAKER

Those are the very things which I understand he denies.

Mr. MacVEAGH

No, Sir; we do not know what he denies.

Mr. SPEAKER

May I point out that I do not for one moment suggest that the House should not discuss these matters. All that I do is to say that the House should not break into the ordinary rule and occupy three hours of its time, which has been allotted to other matters, by discussing a matter of this kind as being a definite matter of urgent public importance.

Mr. DEVLIN

Arising out of this question of urgency, which is the only question on which you are seemingly inclined not to permit the House to adjourn, is it not a very urgent matter if the allegations be true, and that is a question which we will

have to decide here in this House—[HON. MEMBERS: "No!"]—on which this House will claim its right to give its opinion, as between the statement of the Commissioner and the statements of fourteen or fifteen of this Force declared to be gallant and devoted servants of the State by the right hon. Gentleman the Chief Secretary? Is not the House entitled to have this matter discussed in view of the intense passion that the statements have aroused in the country and the possibility of serious and immediate bloodshed in consequence? I say, in view of the fact that Irish business has occupied practically none of the time of this House, that we are entitled, those of us who still represent a section of the Irish people, to have this matter probed to the bottom in the one place in which the nation would be enabled to form its own judgment as to the relative merits of the evidence on both sides.

Mr. MacVEAGH

May I also point out with all respect that not a hint has been given from the Government Bench that there will be any sworn inquiry into the charges preferred against this officer. Having regard to this fact, is not the House entitled to demand that there should be an inquiry into charges of this sort?

Mr. SPEAKER

I do not dispute for one moment the proposition which the hon. Member has laid down. All I dispute is, that it can be considered an urgent matter, either a definite matter or one of urgent public importance. The matters raised by the two hon. Members are well worthy of discussion; they are founded, as I understand, upon a report of a speech which was made and which the author of the speech repudiates the accuracy of altogether, and the Chief Secretary says it is an entirely distorted account. I am bound to accept those statements, and thereupon am I to interrupt the ordinary business of the House—[HON. MEMBERS: "Yes!" and "No!"]—to discuss as urgent a matter which occurred on the 17th June?

Mr. MacVEAGH

Then how are we to obtain a discussion on the subject, if the Government will not give an inquiry and you will not allow the House to investigate?

Colonel WEDGWOOD

On a point of Order. Is it not a new ruling that the question of what the alternative business of the House may be should come into your decision as to whether a matter is a matter of definite and urgent importance? Is not that a ruling which might be used by future Speakers, I do not say by yourself, in every case to prevent discussion whenever the Government wishes to have a subject burked?

Mr. SPEAKER

I am not influenced by the fact that a particular Bill is down for discussion to-day. That does not influence me, but this rule is meant to apply to exceptional circumstances, and if it can be shown that there are such exceptional circumstances as that the ordinary business of the House must be displaced in order that discussion should take place upon it under the conditions laid down in the rules, well and good, but in my judgment that is not so.

Sir D. MACLEAN

The question of the exercise of your discretion in this matter is one, as we all know, of the deepest importance to the rights of Debate in this House. As I understand it, your ruling is this: You agree that it is a matter definite, you agree that it is public, but you do not agree that it is urgent.

Mr. SPEAKER

I do not agree that it is definite. It is very indefinite. Statements are made on one side, and the man who utters those statements, or is alleged to have uttered them, denies them. It is not urgent, because it occurred on the 17th of June, and it is not definite because there is a distinct difference of opinion as to whether the words were uttered or not.

Sir EDWARD CARSON

May I ask my right hon. Friend, in justice to the Divisional Commissioner, whether the House will be given an opportunity of discussing this matter, so that it may not be left as if there were foundation for the charge made against him?

Mr. BRACE

I do not rise at all to enter into controversies with the Chair, but I desire to associate myself with the right hon. Gentleman who has made an appeal to the Leader of the House that suitable time should be given for the discussion of this subject. The Leader of the House must conclude, from what has transpired, that if no discussion is allowed it will create a very difficult impression, not only in Ireland but in this country. It was only yesterday that we had in London a great Congress to discuss the Irish situation, and I beg the right hon. Gentleman to realise the gravity of the situation and to give some time for a discussion.

Colonel ASHLEY

If the Leader of the Opposition asked for a day to discuss the Irish Estimates, would not that be given automatically?

Mr. BONAR LAW

I was going to say that, naturally, if there was time I should be glad that there should be such a discussion. It can be done if one of the Supply Days is chosen for that purpose, and the Irish Vote is put down, but I quite recognise that there is a limited number of them, and other subjects also demand discussion. This subject can also be raised on the Consolidated Fund, and I do not see why advantage should not be taken of that occasion.

Mr. O'CONNOR

I submit it as a matter of urgency, because of my knowledge of the state of dangerous excitement which this has created in Ireland, because I think that danger will only be increased instead of being diminished if an opportunity be not given of discussing this speech where the right hon. Gentleman, the Chief Secretary, can have full opportunity of repudiating, or of defending, or explaining the speech. With regard to the fact to which you have made reference, namely, that this incident occurred as far back as June, 1917, may I point your attention to the fact, as vital to that part of the case, that the first publication of this alleged speech was on last Saturday, and that I took the first opportunity on Monday of bringing it before the attention of the House, and I would put it to you strongly that in making this proposal, I am doing so to avert what I consider an impending disaster in Ireland?

Mr. SPEAKER

I do not dispute for one moment the bonâ fides of the hon. Member, and I also admit that he has brought the matter before the House on the first opportunity. Still, the speech was made on the 17th June. The report of it contained, amongst other statements, a statement that martial law was going to be proclaimed on the 21st, which was untrue, and which did not happen, and, if we take that as a sample of the matters contained in the speech, I think we may judge to a considerable extent of the accuracy of it.

Mr. DEVLIN

We had the admission from the right hon. Gentleman the Chief Secretary for Ireland, that a speech was made. He has admitted a speech was made. He denies that the speech which has been quoted by my hon. Friend is a true description of the speech delivered, but the right hon. Gentleman has not told us what the nature of the speech was. We have one allegation that a certain speech was delivered and another allegation that a speech was delivered, but not of the character described, and I think the House is entitled to know

whether this military officer, who is at present in charge of the police in Munster, delivered this speech, whether it was a speech of the character which it is declared to be by these constables, or what was the character of the speech. I think we are entitled, in view of what my hon. Friend has stated—and he very clearly indicates the intensity of feeling existing in Ireland—I think we are entitled as a matter of urgency to have the matter discussed here and now.

Mr. MacVEAGH

Would it not be in the interests of the economy of Parliamentary time to let the discussion take place to-night, instead of giving it a whole day and an evening?

Mr. SPEAKER

None of the arguments which have been used will influence me in the course which I have felt it my duty, very regretfully, to take. I do not think the ordinary business of the House should be broken into. All the matters which hon. Gentlemen have raised are, as I think, very proper subjects for discussion at the proper time, but not to-day.