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Speech for L. & H. Friday 23rd November, 1973


Dr. Garret Fitzgerald, T. D., Minister for Foreign Affairs

This debate is being held at an historic moment - in the immediate aftermath of the agreement amongst the Unionist, Alliance and SDLP parties in Northern Ireland to share power, and a bare two weeks before the talks between these parties and the Irish and British Governments at which agreement will be sought - and I believe reached - on a Council of Ireland.

Much yet remains to be discussed and agreement on the outstanding issues will not be easy. Yet one cannot at this moment face the future without a sense of optimism, a feeling that the momentum of history is on the side of those seeking peace, reconciliation and a just solution to the problem of involving all of us in these islands. Politicians in Northern Ireland, so long seeming to be at the mercy of events, have clearly started to master their environment, to influence the affairs of that part of Ireland constructively, to offer the kind of skilled leadership which can turn even the most dangerous situation into one of hope. In Britain and in the Republic too the response by political leaders to the events of Northern Ireland has gained in maturity and judgement as these tragic years have passed, so that the interaction of political forces in all three areas has become positive and constructive to an exceptional degree. How has this come about? This is a moment at which it is appropriate to look back over these years.

Four years ago there existed a political vacuum, starting to fill with dangerous forces, later to prove lethal. In the North itself the Unionist Government of the day staggered from crisis to crisis, clearly disorientated and incapable of responding in the manner or at the pace appropriate to the needs of the situation. The Opposition groups, representing the minority, were at that time scattered, fragmented and still leaderless. The British Government, having mastered the immediate crisis by sending in the Army, did not seem to know what to do next. And in the Republic, to an extent that became clear only six months later, the Government was divided.

No political organisation in these islands was



in fact adequately equipped to face the explosion in Northern Ireland in August 1969; all made mistakes of one kind or another. But I make the claim, which I believe I can justify here to-night, that the political opposition in the Republic met this crisis more effectively and more intelligently than any other group at that time. I shall document this by quoting to you from the policy statement of my party in September 1969, a bare few weeks after the terrible events of August, that had thrown the whole of Ireland into such turmoil and uncertainty.

First, this document identified the problem of Northern Ireland quite bluntly and uncompromisingly as one of fear - "fear of each other by both sections of the Community". It said that as a result of the efforts of a small dominant group in Northern Ireland, the unreasoning fears of many members of the Protestant majority in that area had been kept alive, so that even a non-sectarian movement for civil rights had been seen by many Protestants as a threat to their way of life. At the same time the Catholic minority, many confined to ghettos, lived in fear of attack by Protestant extremists.

"This problem of mutual fear", the Fine Gael statement said, "is the real problem and until it is resolved the people of the North will never be able to lead normal lives, whether they find themselves continuing in Northern Ireland or in a United Ireland".

"It is the duty of political parties in the Republic", the statement went on, "who must be concerned for the people of Northern Ireland, and especially for the exploited and maltreated minority, to recognise" this problem of fear. This duty is reinforced by the self-evident fact that, force as a weapon of policy having been rejected by all responsible groups in the Republic, the only way in which the present divided state of this island can, or should, be modified, is with the consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland".

Thus for the first time was stated clearly and unambiguously the policy of reunification by consent, on which the whole edifice of Northern Ireland policy in the Republic since that time has been erected. So long as political parties in the Republic had failed to face this reality, no start could be made on the road to a solution of the Northern Ireland problem.

Up to that time the most that had been said in the Republic was that the problem could not be solved by violence - and even that had not always been spelt out. The concept of seeking to pressurise Northern Ireland into the Republic, by seeking to persuade, or even to intimidate, British opinion into "handing over" the North regardless of the views of the majority of the population, had remained alive throughout the half century since independence and had indeed lain behind many of the attitudes and policy utterances of political Parties in the Republic.

Now however this policy was abjured and with it the threat hanging over the Northern Protestant majority began to be dissipated. The way was clear for a policy of conciliation and reconciliation - for direct approaches to Northern Protestant opinion designed to assuage past fears and create an atmosphere of trust and confidence in which the two parts of Ireland could begin to grow together again, hopefully more rapidly than they had grown apart during the last fifty years up to 1969. The immediate impact of this policy shift was less than might have been hoped. The government of the day, divided in their counsel for a further eight months and fighting off onslaughts from the hawks inside and outside the Party during the months and years that followed, was in no position to accept and promulgate this new approach but found it necessary to speak with divided, and, for much of the time, confused voices. At the same time in Northern Ireland itself the creation of the breakaway Provisional I.R.A. movement built up again tensions that had been damped down by the intervention of the British army in August 1969 at the request of the Catholic minority. Massive British army raiding in search of the weapons so disastrously imported into Northern Ireland precipitated a popular reaction which favoured the launching of a new guerilla campaign in the cities of Northern Ireland, different in kind to, and far more dangerous in terms of the provocation it gave to sectarianism, than that of the 1950s.

But although the new political approach in the Republic seemed for the moment to make little headway in the face of these developments, the years that followed saw a gradual acceptance by a growing majority of the people of the Republic of the concept of unification by consent. Thus it was that when direct rule was imposed, and Stormont suspended, in March 1972, public opinion in the Republic was prepared for the situation thus created. This action by the British government was seen for what it was - a dramatic reversal of policies pursued for centuries with a recognition that the time had come to 'un-play' the Orange card so strikingly referred to by Lord Randolph Churchill almost a century earlier. The way was clear for the negotiation of a new solution to replace that of 1920 which had so abysmally failed. What form should this solution take? Some of its key features were foreshadowed in a Fine Gael policy statement of September 1969 - first, the establishment in Northern Ireland of a form of government that would give representation at Executive level to the minority. This had been described by Fine Gael in 1969 as "the sole means of reassuring the minority as to the full and continued implementation of the reforms and fair treatment for this minority". Second, the initiation of discussions between the Irish government and the British and Northern Ireland governments for the creation of a body similar to the Council of Ireland envisaged half a century earlier, and which never came into being. This too was proposed in these words in the Fine Gael 1969 document. Third, the initiative by the government and political parties in Dail Eireann in consultation with representatives of all sections of the community in Northern Ireland of a study of the changes necessary in the Constitution and laws of the Republic in order to make them acceptable to the widest possible spectrum of opinion in Ireland. Thus did Fine Gael in 1969 describe what is now being undertaken by an All Party Committee of Dail Eireann - which establishment was itself the last of the policy proposals put forward by Fine Gael in that year.

Almost fifty years ago the first government in this State planned a diplomatic campaign to bring about a transformation of the British Commonwealth - as it then was - a campaign which within five years secured the establishment of the Dominions of the Commonwealth as independent sovereign States. The same spirit motivated Fine Gael in 1969 in planning its campaign to resolve the Northern Ireland problem by patient negotiation of the only kind of solution that could work - and the plans then laid and put forward in the policy document published in September of that year are now at last coming to fruition.

Of course much remains to be done. For the power-sharing Executive in Northern Ireland to be established and start working, agreement must first be reached on the detailed working of a Council of Ireland. The progress already made in this respect is striking and provides a very good basis on which to build. The agreement reached the day before yesterday in Belfast on the basic structures for a Council of Ireland follows closely the lines proposed by the National Coalition Government to the British Government two and a half months ago and discussed with that government at meetings at various levels since then. In particular the Belfast agreement makes it clear that the Council must from the very beginning have executive as well as consultative functions, and while much yet remains to be discussed and agreed it is also now clear that the related matters of policing and the establishment of a common law enforcement area have been brought within the scope of the Council. These, together with really effective measures for the protection of human rights, are among the matters which in the view of the National Coalition Government come within the compass of a Council of Ireland as they are measures which can best be handled in this island by joint action - and the Council of Ireland provides the necessary channel for such joint action. In the forthcoming talks between the British and Irish Governments and the Northern Ireland Executive designate they will be among the major subjects for discussion and, I hope, agreement. Such agreement must precede the establishment of a power-sharing Executive. I hope that that negotiation will be successful. Those engaged in it have all been involved one way or the other in the processes that led to agreement in Belfast on Wednesday last and the same will to succeed will animate them in this new negotiation.

No one in the Irish government nor, I believe, in the British government or power-sharing parties in Northern Ireland is sanguine enough to believe that the mere establishment of a power-sharing Executive and of a Council of Ireland will of itself there and then bring an end to violence in the North. There may, indeed, even be a recrudescence of violence for a period. But these new institutions will establish the framework within which violence can be brought to an end - the only framework within which this can be achieved. When Northern Ireland is governed by an Executive representative of the whole of the minority and of a very large part of the majority, and when that Executive is working in close harmony with the government of the Republic in matters such as policing and common law enforcement, then violence must wither in the face of the enormous volume of support that such a political solution will undoubtedly secure.

Last Wednesday night was an historic occasion for Ireland. I think in the light of history it will be seen that that night the biggest hurdle in the way of the restoration of peace and the movement towards reconciliation amongst the people of Ireland was overcome. For those of us involved in the events of that day, even peripherally, it was a day we shall remember.

Will what we are now forging bring us to a united Ireland? This is the great issue on which North and South we must agree to differ. We in the Republic are entitled to believe that by working together in trust and confidence politicians North and South, and the people North

and South, will find in time a common basis for unity, a unity coming about by freely given consent because it is seen to be in the interests of all. I know that in Northern Ireland there are those who hold a contrary view. They cannot at this stage see how their minds could be changed, or even how their children's minds could be changed, on this issue. We respect their convictions but are convinced that in time we can bring them round to our point of view, by persuasion, by example, and by showing them that we care for them as much as we care for ourselves. Irish unity - the unity of the people of Ireland - can be built on one basis only, that of the mutual respect and love we bear for one another. It may seem naive or even satirical to speak of respect and love at a time when so many are losing their lives in a welter of hatred. But it is a reaction against this hatred and a clear recognition of its intrinsically evil character and of the terrible things it is doing to our country and people that we will come to learn and to understand that only mutual respect and love can wipe out the injuries done by those blinded by fear and animated by hate.