

Check Against Delivery

SPEECH FOR NIC ICTU CONFERENCE CANAL COURT HOTEL, NEWRY 25 APRIL 2006

Peter Hain, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland

Let me start by paying tribute to what you and your members have done, not just in the search for permanent peace in Northern Ireland, but for the way in which you have done this.

Whatever was happening elsewhere, trade unions remained a bulwark against sectarianism and racism – a shining example of how things can, and should be, done. You have worked across communities. You have led by example. In your branches and in workplaces you have shown how it is possible for the people of Northern Ireland to have a shared future together for their mutual benefit and for the benefit of all those who live here. A proud role trade unions have played and continue to play.

I thank you for what you have done and I cannot emphasise too strongly how important it is that you carry on with your efforts. You are living proof that a shared future can work.

And a shared future is what there must be if the people of Northern Ireland are to thrive and prosper. It lies at the heart of government policy. A commitment that shapes and underpins all we do. A commitment we hold in common with the Irish government and all those, both here and abroad, who have made such efforts for peace over the past decade.

There can be no alternative to a shared future. Segregation and division is not an option. United We Stand Divided We Fall, has for long been the motto of trade unionists. It should equally become the motto of the people of Northern Ireland facing the great challenges that lie ahead.

United we must stand against competition from the global economy - united in security and prosperity. Divided we fall – back from the standard of living and quality of public services the people of Northern Ireland want and deserve.

Two years ago in China I saw engineering workers on 60p **an hour**. Two weeks ago In India I saw its biggest company recruiting 6,000 university graduates **a month**. China and India will gobble up our jobs and our trade and our prosperity if we don't put division behind us.

Too often around the world there has been too much segregation and prejudice, and behind it brutality and violence, leading ultimately to ethnic cleansing and war crimes.

Every responsible government, every responsible politician – indeed, every responsible citizen – must set themselves against such a course.

Without diminishing the difficulties we still face, we must not belittle the advances which have been made. Slowly but surely we are moving beyond the old demons to a society which is at peace with itself.

A Shared Future is not a meaningless slogan. It means we stand together, not apart. It means sharing democracy, sharing power, sharing cross-border relationships: the heart of the Belfast Agreement endorsed by the people standing together in the referendum.

Peace is never a short-term project. Nor is it ever easy.

But the fruits of peace are so great – and the alternative so terrible – that the search for peace, and the prosperity it can bring, must never be abandoned.

It has taken the European Union more than half a century to get to where it is now. It arose from the ashes of World War Two with its guiding principle to replace the war-war which had dogged Europe for much of the previous millennium with jaw-jaw.

Gradually, through discussion and debate and agreement, through trade and the free movement of capital and labour, it progressed and helped to generate wealth, stability and high social standards unthinkable in the first half of the twentieth century, in a continent on which, over the ages, more nations had fought against each other than anywhere else in the world.

The remarkable success of the Republic's economy is to a great measure due to the way it has grasped the opportunities offered by the EU.

Now Northern Ireland has the chance to share in that future – to share in the enormous growth that has occurred south of the border over the past fifteen years. In future, cross-border co-operation will be an essential element in developing a sustainable Northern Irish economy.

But nobody should be in any doubt that spreading prosperity depends on social and political stability being achieved here. That is essential if we are to have a shared and peaceful society. One, which can attract and retain investment, welcome both tourists and newcomers, and demonstrate a political culture that is both generous and co-operative.

Northern Ireland's days of segregation must be ended. High walls – physical or emotional - are no solution to deep divisions, as we know from the last thirty five years in Belfast. They buy only time, they do not create peace. They do not replace old past enmity with new future trust.

Sustainable peace in Northern Ireland will require many years of effort. But the government is determined to set the direction towards a normal civic society in which all people are of equal value, where differences are resolved through dialogue, and where people are treated impartially. A society in which there is equity, respect for diversity and a recognition of our interdependence.

The document, *A Shared Future*, which the Government published last year, clearly indicated the direction in which we wish to go.

The policy framework followed a very successful consultation in which more than 10,000 people participated. Anyone reading the responses can be in no doubt that the people of Northern Ireland long to escape the bitterness of sectarianism.

Through this policy, the government is determined to set a direction which will become part of the DNA of a new Northern Ireland. My colleague Jeff Rooker will announce the first action plans for A Shared Future and the Racial Equality Strategy on Thursday. For these good intentions to have real meaning, however, it is essential that they are turned into actions.

And that must start with reconciliation – reconciliation which is not an event, but a process that takes time.

Without reconciliation, there will remain division and distrust.

And division and distrust ultimately destroys lives, families and communities. It also destroys prosperity, hope and opportunity for all.

Division and antagonism have a direct impact on investment and tourism, on personal and community safety and policing, on education, housing and health, on urban and rural regeneration, on community and economic development, on culture and the arts and on incoming minorities.

Of course, Northern Ireland is not alone in facing challenges of integration and community cohesion. What marks it out is its tradition of segregation and paramilitary organisations which can distort and destroy the quality of life for many people.

The challenges in the world today are so great that no nation or community can afford to be obsessed with its own introspective problems. We have to compete with global economic giants like China and India.

That will be hard enough if we are pulling together. To attempt it with a divided society would mean certain failure.

And so there are practical reasons why we must move towards a shared future. And the ways we do that are practical, too. For example, our public spaces and town centres must be shared spaces. Areas for all communities, not just one community.

Recent developments like Victoria Square will only be viable if they are free and safe for all.

The sustainability of the economy of the Shankill Road or Derry City Centre or Portadown or Newry depends on everyone being and feeling safe to shop and travel.

The public and private sectors are investing millions of pounds in developments in Belfast City Centre, in the Titanic and Cathedral Quarters. All will succeed if they become the shared hubs of a new economy. They will fail if they degenerate into sectarian scrambles, in which success is measured in square feet of territory rather than shared employment, housing and services for all.

There are enormous opportunities in the redevelopment of the Crumlin Road to generate a prosperous and outward-looking face for North Belfast – but only if we avoid the temptation of turning it into a further bitter sectarian divide.

We can already see in the West Belfast Regeneration Partnership Project – which was initiated by Unison – a practical example of creating inclusive methods of making things happen on the basis of need while changing the patterns of the past through inclusive ways of working together in partnership.

In too many areas reminders of a divided society still remain, with paramilitary murals along peace-lines and on streets and housing estates in interface areas. This is despite the growing number of local initiatives to replace them. Those visible manifestations of sectarianism and racism must be removed, particularly illegal and aggressive paramilitary displays.

In their place must be created safe and shared spaces for people to meet, play, work and live together.

Through the community-based arts project 'Re-imagining Communities' we want to transform these divisive images and replace them with interesting and creative works of art which will project a positive image welcoming to all communities. We want to encourage partnerships between communities and engender a sense of pride in space shared with neighbours, so that peace-lines are gradually transformed to a dynamic, welcoming and safer environment.

One example of how an accepted part of life can be used to change things is our library system.

The network of public libraries across Northern Ireland traditionally provides an immensely valuable resource for the pursuit of cultural and educational activities.

It offers free or very low-cost access to books, music and film for pleasure and enlightenment, and to a wealth of information on the internet, with the expertise of library staff to assist people.

Now in addition, libraries have become among the most important shared spaces at local level. Great efforts are made to ensure they offer a shared and welcoming environment.

There can be no such thing as separate and equal in Northern Ireland. There is only separate and poor. People who live in sectarian divides, not only face an unequal risk of violence, but they suffer lower living standards. For economic development in deprived areas requires political stability.

There is no doubt that poverty contributes to violence. Just as violence has contributed enormously to the poverty of many lives, especially in Belfast. It is hardly surprising that where levels of violence are high, levels of educational attainment are low, unemployment high and paramilitarism embedded.

Anyone with get up and go, gets up and goes. And the cycle of violence/low achievement/unemployment/poverty and so back to violence will continue down through future generations unless it can be stopped now.

The rule of law – through proper policing and a thorough commitment to equal treatment and human rights – is the basis of all progress, and one of the real successes of the peace process.

But there are limits to what the law can achieve. Though its involvement is vital some changes can only come about through altering attitudes. Divided communities cannot be compelled to come together. Yet come together they must if we are to enjoy the rewards of a shared future.

Segregation is not benign. It means exclusion, hatred and inequality. Its founding principles are fear and distance.

We cannot go on mistaking the pattern of segregated housing in Northern Ireland for choice. For many people it is a matter of fear. Survey after survey shows that, if safe, many would opt to live in mixed communities. In a modern western democracy, it is not acceptable to say that someone can or cannot live in a certain area because of their religion or race.

Breaking down the old barriers and bringing people together needs to start early.

Prejudices learned in childhood can affect someone for their entire life. Which is why education has been placed at the heart of our Shared Future programme.

The segregation of our school system comes at a high price, particularly at times of surplus capacity and sharply falling rolls. The result is that resources are spread more thinly or wasted, and vital needs go unmet.

We need to explore new ways of schooling which involve sharing facilities. That will give children and teachers not only better facilities but higher standards through a better use of resources.

The strategic review of education, to be led by Sir George Bain, will examine the funding of the system and will focus on the strategic planning and organisation of the estate taking into account curriculum changes and falling rolls.

An important element of this review will be to consider how best to meet our duty to encourage and facilitate integrated education.

In improving school planning we must tackle the challenges (and obvious tension) of addressing parental choice and the issue of falling rolls. Our ultimate aim must be to ensure that we are integrating educational provision across the board much more effectively, so that our educational resources are used to raise standards and opportunities for all, not to maintain costly and wasteful divisions.

That is an obligation on all of us who wish to see a better future for Northern Ireland. But sharing is not all about bricks and mortar as the integrated sector and other school sectors know very well.

The Department of Education funds programmes in the schools and youth sectors to bring together young people from both sides of the community divide to give them the opportunity to learn about each other.

We want to ensure that children and young people from the age of three to twenty-five are given the opportunity to see and experience how people of differing political and cultural traditions can live together in mutual respect, and with a shared understanding of their interdependence.

Building confidence is not only an objective for our young people. Teachers too need to have the skills to deal with difficult and contentious issues and our aim is for all teachers to be competent to prepare our young people for a shared future in a changing and diverse society.

We need to ensure that future generations in Northern Ireland are prepared for the challenges of diversity through an education system that promotes tolerance, common citizenship and human rights for all – within and across the traditional different models of schooling, but no child escapes being actively engaged with these themes of a shared future.

There are huge opportunities in local government, too. Central to the Review of Public Administration is a drive for a new civic leadership and shared, inclusive governance.

In the past, local government in Northern Ireland has been associated with sectarian fiefdoms and some of the most blatant acts of prejudice and segregation, leaving a legacy of mistrust.

To ensure a new-found confidence in an inclusive society which embraces diversity, we have placed *A Shared Future* at the heart of the RPA.

In devolving powers to a local level again, we will therefore embed equality of access and opportunity, so that every citizen – of whatever background or belief – can have confidence in their council’s ability to deliver services even-handedly, whilst also providing a genuine forum for political debate and dialogue.

To this end, a system of strong safeguards will form the centrepiece of the new model of local government. It will fundamentally differ from the current system by providing, for the first time, statutory checks and balances that will protect the rights of minority communities and individuals — on all sides.

So there cannot and will not be any question of one community dominating another in the old divisive and oppressive way.

Sharing is not about sinking your own identity and culture into someone else's. It is not about being taken over or 'surrendering'. Rather it is about standing proud about yourself, your community, your history and your beliefs – but in a way that shows respect for someone else so that they can feel secure in respecting you too. Republicanism and Loyalism, Nationalism and Unionism – none need fear each other any longer. All can work together with their traditions and objectives shown respect and tolerance by each other in a common shared future, resolved by democratic politics.

None of the processes which I have outlined today involve a single event. None will be quick or easy to achieve.

The move to permanent peace and security is bound to be slow and sometimes frustrating. It needs time, hard work, patience, persistence, good will and, above all, the determination to succeed.

But to abandon this *Shared Future* agenda because things are not changing things overnight, would be to drag Northern Ireland backwards to the darkness of the past, not light up a future of opportunity and hope for our children and grandchildren.

Much still needs to be done. But much progress has been made on the long, often tortuous road to permanent peace. An end to the IRA's war, decommissioning, the dismantling of the last army watchtowers in South Armagh, arrangements for winding up the home battalions of the RIR, the removal of numerous aggressive murals, and plans to

restore devolution – all of these have taken Northern Ireland light years away from the bitterness and horror of the past.

With A Shared Future, we are setting our face firmly towards sharing and tolerance and against segregation and violence. From schools and libraries to local councils and town centres, and however long it takes, there is no alternative to a shared future if Northern Ireland is to become a successful part of the global economy, and the Trade Union movement will be crucial to that success.

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