

SPEECH

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AT

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Mr. Chairman,

I am very glad to be here this week, the week in which the Merriman School is discussing Parliament. Of course my predecessors in this platform have already said a great deal about the history and form of parliamentary democracy and the efficiency, or lack of it, on this part of the island. The preoccupation that I want to share with you is much more basic - I want to talk about what are the foundations of Parliamentary democracy, and can they be laid in the northern part of this country. Bearing in mind the context of the wider relationships between North and South which exist in Ireland, and the very nature of the creation of both the North and the South, I find the different parliaments which I have wandered around one thing which strikes me most of all, coming from the North, is how many parliamentarians take it for granted, never even consider the nature and the foundation stones of parliamentary democracy. We in the North don't have them and therefore we have to think about them all the time. If the litmus test of the parliamentary system was the number and variety of parliaments, then we could in the North claim to be the most parliamentary place on earth. If parliaments solved problems our problems would be solved ten times over.

From its very inception the North had two parliaments: it had a parliament at Westminster taking control over matters concerning the crown, defence, foreign affairs, treason, titles, as well as naturalisation, trade marks, and coinage. These were matters which were excepted from local jurisdiction and local power. Then as well we had the parliament at Stormont, with the powers conferred on it by the Government of Ireland Act (1920) - the general power to make laws for the peace, order, and good government of Northern Ireland (a quotation I think from the Unionist election manifesto around 1912) subject to the exceptions mentioned, of the powers retained by the Westminster Parliament.

This major power which was conferred on Stormont at that time I think reflects a couple of major ironies. The first was the fact that the Unionists didn't wish for any such parliament,

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and they only received it because of the achievements of Irish Nationalists. I often think that when we lay blame on other people for things in politics which we don't like, that we might sometimes think that maybe the things we don't like might have something to do with the consequences of our own methods. I am talking about partition when I say that. It is often said that partition is the direct result of British attitudes and British attitudes only. I think its time that we considered the proposition that perhaps the methods that we Irish use might have something to do with the creation of partition. Because if we look about at the size of different parts of the world today, if we look at Cyprus, the Lebanon etc., we find that in every society where violence was used as a means of healing a divide, the net result was the drawing of a line between the two sides of the divide. And indeed if we look at the North today, it is staring us in the face: if the violence continues, one possibility is very clear - another line will be drawn. And then we will obviously also blame someone else for that, and we won't think that perhaps it was a consequence of the methods that we used ourselves and didn't think this through. So that one of the ironies of the creation of the Stormont Parliament which the Unionists didn't want was that it was the result of achievements by nationalist Ireland.

The second irony was of course that once it was set up, it enabled the unionists to mark out and preserve their wholly dominant position in the North of Ireland, to strengthen their sense of their own independence, a sense which led them to actual outbreaks of violence in 1974.

The Stormont Parliament fell in 1972, and, as I say, it wasn't the only parliament that served in the North. It was succeeded in 1973 by another one, a less powerful one, the Northern Ireland Assembly, which was shorn, in particular, of the security powers of Stormont. That was hardly on the statute books before it was prorogued as a result of the loyalist challenge to Sunningdale, and the collapse of British will. Since then we have had different forms of Assembly in the north. We have had Merlyn Rees's Constitutional Convention in 1975. We have had

Humphrey Atkins's Constitutional Conference in 1980. And we have had James Prior's rolling devolution Assembly of 1982, which still staggers on, on one leg. There has been a stream of British discussion papers with enough suggestions for forms of government and variations of them to provide constitutions for hundreds of states ...

That underlines the fact that parliaments of themselves and varieties of them are not the litmus test of a parliamentary democracy. The first defining characteristic of such a democracy is, as it always has been, itself, that consensus. There cannot be a fixed and unchanging majority and minority about matters of importance in any democratic society. Parliamentary democracy works on the assumption that its citizens agree on certain basic things: that they agree on who they are, and how they wish to be governed. This is the rock upon which parliament is built, and no form of parliamentary democracy or parliamentary assembly, however intricate its balloting procedures, can be built or can work without the rock of consensus. It is a search for that rock, that consensus and consent that is the search for peace and stability in the North of Ireland. That is not to say that all members of a society must share the same culture or the same aspirations. In fact, something which appears a contradiction is when you look across the world at all the countries that are united countries, and you ask yourself the question: why are they united? The answer appears to be a contradiction. Every country that is united in the world today is united because it accepts diversities. That is a lesson which we in this country have yet to learn. The acceptance of diversity is the essence of unity. And unless we learn that we will never, ever, ever, unite this country, and the acceptance of diversity means the acceptance of things that perhaps we do not like. It means the accomodation of difference, and the acceptance of differences that are perhaps very different from our own traditions, background and culture. For if we look at any society where any one tradition tries to dominate another it can only end up in division.

I know there are basic differences, and very, very fundamental differences in the north of Ireland today. It is necessary to recognise that first to come to terms with them, as the Forum Report has put it, we have got to deal with both traditions and both identities in Ireland and the democratic rights of every citizen on this island must be accepted. Both of these identities must have equally satisfactory, secure and durable political, administrative and symbolic protection and expression. For Northern Ireland, recognising basic differences and coming to terms with them, means that the different aspirations in our community must be respected, and that there must be accommodation between them, not a battle of one and the other, because it is the fact that each tradition has sought the abandonment of the other that we have a problem. It is because one sought to maintain its supremacy by, for example, the threat of physical intimidation in 1912, that Northern Ireland came into being in the first place.

When you think that we are talking about parliament, the fundamental principle in most democracies is the sovereignty of parliament, a legal principle, and it was the very defiance of that principle that created Northern Ireland when in 1912 the majority on this island voted for home rule which was in those days what we would now call devolution. It was the threat of violence and the defiance of that fact by the Unionists and the collapse of British will in the face of it, that led to the chain of events which led to the establishment of Northern Ireland. And it taught people lessons, and the lessons it taught them are still at the heart of our problems today, because Unionists learned that when they threatened the British, the British backed off. And others then learned that when you won even by the ballot, by democratic methods, you didn't succeed: therefore what was the point in democracy. That produced a strong argument for the use of violence and those two forces, those who threatened violence and those who actually use it are still the forces that prevent development in the North of Ireland today. And those two forces were strengthened yet again in 1974 and repeated in the Ulster Workers Council strike which brought down the democratically arranged settlement.

But even this week we can hear, and in the past month, we can hear the very same card being played, because the lesson has never been forgotten - the threat against the British to do certain things which people don't like. So the sovereignty of Parliament in that sense having been breached has left us with the legacy which runs right to the heart of our problem. Of course the defiance of the principle which this represents has been fostered and developed by the trumpeters of ourselves alone on both sides of the community divide in the North. The flouting of this principle is necessarily associated with the use of violence.

That leads me to the second defining characteristic of parliamentary democracy, which is non-violence. I do not mean the mere avoidance of violence, I mean the positive assertion of political activity as an alternative to war, not just as a means to a particular end, but as a value in itself, a recognition of a higher form of social organisation it is not easy to reach and maintain, and must be worked at, and sweated for. This essentially is a rational approach to politics. But man is also moral, and morality also requires the conduct of political activity by peaceful means. It is extraordinary that violent societies are often church-going societies, where individuals attach great importance to the role of religion in their lives. This is another factor for the discussion of parliamentary democracy in Ireland - the role of the churches.

It is a major influence and it is certainly true of Northern Ireland today that it is a place where religion has a very deep influence on people's lives, and they have no difficulty in accommodating the ten commandments in their personal lives while they commit or advocate the committing of the most appalling acts of violence and injustice in their political lives. There can be a complete disjunction between the two: the words of churchmen condemning murder and strife fall on the headless heads of the men of violence and the men who perpetrate injustice. But the words of churchmen and the commandments are listened to respectfully, attentively and dutifully, and the art of distinguishing between the churchman

as a politician and the churchman as a moralist dies in this country. It is an art which goes unexamined, and also goes unexplained. And why is it, why is it that communities that belong to the same christian tradition, a tradition that upholds humility and peace, why is it that they produce such bitter and endless strife? This is the question which should be examined and be answered by churchmen. We have no shortage of advice from leaders of different churches in this country, about our political problems, and one question that I would like to put to the church leadership in this country is this: why is it that all across the world in places where we have the deepest conflicts between communities, conflicts which appear impossible to resolve - the Middle East, the Lebanon, Iran, Cyprus, Ireland - are all places where people eat religiously. Belfast has the highest church-going population of any city in western Europe, on both sides of the divide. Yet a great wall is built to separate Catholic and protestant. That is a challenge to churchmen as well as the politicians. The challenge that it represents ... is this, that the certitude with which we are reared, when we are reared with deep religious convictions, as we are in this country, runs contrary to the compromises essential if we are to live together in a divided society. And the cast of mind that is created by this certitude makes it difficult if not impossible to accommodate differences, and to compromise. I would like to ask the leaders of the different churches in this country to address their minds to that problem, and if they give it serious study and thought, and if they happen to come up with answers, they would make a contribution not only to peace in Ireland but to peace in the world.

Continuing on the second criterion of non-violence, it is often claimed of course by those who are violent that non-violence and parliamentary methods have achieved nothing. They correctly of course see that non-violence and parliamentary methods are one and the same. They often say that this has achieved nothing in the north of Ireland. I think those of us who have been engaged in these methods - parliamentary non-violence - have perhaps been a little remiss in spelling out what actually

has been achieved. When I think of why I went on to the streets of the North in the non-violent civil rights movement (which is why I got involved in politics at all), what we were looking for was simple things like one man one vote, like fair distribution of housing, more housing - the desperate housing problem that we had - jobs, a fair distribution of them. Those are the three basic areas. That was only fifteen years ago and that is not a long time. What has happened in the meantime? We have one man one vote. We have the best housing now in these two islands. My city is one of the best-housed cities in this whole island. It was the worst-housed city in 1967, when I sat in an office in Castle St., as Chairman of the Housing Association, a self-help body and felt so frustrated at the lack of any political attempt at housekeeping, interviewing people night after night and seeing the desperate housing problem face-to-face. Today we have one of the best-housed cities in these islands, achieved by non-violence, and by asking and by pointing out that housing should be taken out of the hands of politicians, and given to an independent technocratic body, the Housing Executive, which has done so.

On the jobs scene in 1974, and we never talk about this, and perhaps we should more often, I was Minister for Commerce for five months. When that Executive fell, on 28 May, the unemployment figures for Northern Ireland were announced - they were 5%, the lowest in our history, and I had been negotiating 4,400 jobs for Newry alone. One of them was a factory employing 1400 people, a German factory, whose managing director was kidnapped and killed by paramilitaries, and the factory never came. The point I am making is that one area where we have not succeeded has been on the jobs front. There are two very good reasons for that: there has been a recession, and the cost of violence. Violence is stopping jobs. The Managing Director of Dupont, the biggest employer in my own city, was assassinated in 1975 by people who today say they have advice centres to help people who are out of work and have social problems. 'Don't worry that your factory is blown up. Come to our centre and we we'll ring the dole for you'. That sort of contradiction is allowed to pass when people

say that parliamentary and non-violent methods have achieved nothing.

All that, plus the fact that today the opportunity for third level education and professional training is open to everybody in the North. In fact, for the first time - we are talking about the parliamentary and constitutional position - for the first time we really have one man one vote for everybody over eighteen. That, allied to the opportunities which exist educationally and in many other ways, means that to go on the road of violence actually means that we have no confidence in ourselves at all, we lack self-confidence if we believe that only violence can solve our problems. Because if we have head and hands and hearts, which is all anybody has, and we have the ability to take our opportunities in society, then we have no less than any other people anywhere, and if we have the self-confidence in ourselves, then we can overcome and anybody that advocates shooting anybody else to achieve his political objectives, is living in his own total blank inability to persuade or to have dialogue with other human beings.

Martin Luther King said in reference to riots by civil rights activists in the United States ... that the limitation of riots, moral questions aside, is that you cannot win, and the participants know it. Hence, rioting is not revolutionary, it is reactionary, because it invites defeat. It involves an emotional catharsis, but it must be followed by a sense of futility. And that is why we insisted in the Forum Report that violence from any quarter must be rejected, and that is why the democratic new Ireland that the Forum wants can only come about through agreement.

This cannot be stressed too often: when we say we need and want unity, that means that we have division. But you cannot have unity between people who are divided unless they agree to it, unless there is agreement, and agreement is an essential in that unity. There are some that would have us believe that the only problem in Ireland is the British presence. It is

part of the problem. But the nature of relationships within the island is also a major part of the problem. A simple question which I often ask people in the north, just to demonstrate that, is: if you were walking down a dark road, or driving down a dark road late at night, and you were to be stopped by a man in a uniform, who would you rather be stopped by, a British soldier, an RUC man, or a UDR man? The vast majority of Catholics would rather be stopped by a British soldier - they would feel safer. What does that mean? It means that the relationships between the communities in the north are just as important to the resolution of the Irish questions as the British presence. The task of parliamentarians and politicians is to persuade the British to, if you like, join the ranks of the persuaders, of those who could persuade the people of Ireland that their future lies in accommodating their differences, in coming to terms with one another in a form of unity that is acceptable to both.

Violence, as they say, invites defeat, and it destroys that which is worth having. Edmund Burke once spoke of this when he was rebuking the British government for its failure to conciliate America. He said 'A further objection to force is that the thing you fought for is not the thing that you recover. But what you recover is depreciated, sunk, wasted and consumed in the contest.' If you lived where I lived you would know that those words are true: 'sunk, depreciated, wasted and consumed.' The violence of the past ten years has done a lot of that apart from the fact that it has killed 2,500 people, and that it has maimed 20,000 people. 'Nothing less will content me', said Burke, 'than whole America.' Nothing less should content us, than Ireland whole.

The only way that Ireland whole, or real unity can be had by any of, north or south, unionist or nationalist, is by having a sensible, worked-out approach. In this regard, I have to say that I believe that the advocates of physical force have at least always made very clear both their objective and their methods towards it. The advocates of the constitutional approach to Irish unity have very often not been very clear about their

strategy. The absence of a clear programme and strategy to achieve objectives is one of the reasons why young people in particular have veered towards more apparently instant approaches. If you like, there are three sorts of groupings that promote Irish unity: there are the physical force people who say quite clearly, get the British out, the way to do it is physical force, and when the British get out the Irish will sit around the table and sort themselves out. I quarrel completely with that analysis, because I do not think it is as simple as that, but at least it is stated and stated clearly.

The other group have been variously described as ^{rabal}~~Dungarvan~~ republicans who state that Irish unity is the only answer, British withdrawal is the only solution, and they never tell us how they are going to do it. They measure every suggested solution against that ultimate objective, and describe it as a sell-out if it is not the ultimate objective. They seek all or nothing. They always end up with nothing. It is like the man who goes into negotiations, comes out with 60% and is told that he has sold out because he did not get the other 40%.

The third grouping, and I would like to include my own party in this, is the grouping that looks at the problem in a sensible way and says 'Here is how we propose to go about it.' And our approach has been what we used to call in the seventies the 'three Rs' - reform, reconciliation, reunification. First of all we have to recognise the fact that all the principles that applied in 1920 do not apply today, because since 1920, two separate entities have grown up in Ireland, with all the consequences of that, which were dealt with in great detail in the Forum Report. As I said recently no one would run a corner shop on the principles upon which they ran a corner shop in 1920, so why should we run the country, or why should we run our policies based on the same principles, after sixty years of developments which have added to the problems.

The North is there. Our view is that the first step towards a solution is to seek equality for all citizens there - that

must be the basis of our thrust in the civil rights movement and, indeed, in every civil rights movement - equality of treatment, on all fronts. And based on that equality, to then move on to reconciliation, because reconciliation can only be based on equality And reconciliation and the breaking down of barriers between sections of the Community that are equals of its very essence creates real unity and that will be the road, that will be the chart, and therefore any proposal that is made by anybody for progress, for development, our yardstick would not be the ultimate, our yardstick would be: will it fit into that pattern, that strategy, that process, will it help us along that road? And if it does that, because, is there anybody in this country who seriously believes that they are going to wake up some morning, and that that morning our problems will be totally solved at one stroke, is there anybody who believes that? That being so, since that is not going to happen, it is clear that only a process will solve our problem. And we must be clear in our minds if we are promoting parliamentary and constitutional activity, what that process is. And every proposal made should be examined against that process to see whether it will help in the political dialogue. And, by the way, that was the fourth proposal of the Forum Report, the forgotten one. Everyone talks about the three proposals - there was a fourth one. The proposal was, that in addition to the three proposals that we put forward, that if anybody had any other proposal which would lead to political development, that that would receive positive consideration.

The basic point that I am making is that I believe that only a process can lead to peace and stability in this island, and that is what we ought to be working for. Of course, these requirements cannot be met within this island, and by this island's people only, a simple fact to which a lot of people are blind, because the Irish problem is not simply what some people would have us believe - a matter of relations between Catholic and protestant in the North of Ireland. It is a matter of relations within this island, and of relations between Britain and Ireland. And therefore the framework in which we must see the solution is the framework of the problem, the British-Irish framework. That is the framework of course

in which a breakthrough took place in 1980, in the historic meeting between Mrs. Thatcher and Mr. Haughey, in which the Anglo-Irish process was first set up, the framework within which the solution is being sought today. That is the framework, set up in 1980, in which the talks are taking place today, between the present government and the British government on the basis of the Forum Report. The requirements for a solution were set out in great detail in that report, and if those requirements are met in the current talks, then I believe that the result would have the support of Irish nationalists everywhere.

The way I see it, really, is that, as for example, in the last ten years, progress was made on the basis of civil rights in the North. One generation can make that progress. You move on to set up the Anglo-Irish Council. If progress comes out of the current talks, you accept that progress. You are not going to get a solution, but we may get progress. We move on, each generation builds on the achievements of the previous. It is the only way we are going to move forward. For too long, from 1920 to 1968, there was no movement in the North of Ireland, none whatsoever, and yet all our principles were intact in terms of our political statements and the status of our parties. If no movement took place, the victims of that were the minority population in the North of Ireland.

And the civil rights issues which we face today are different from those that we faced ten years ago. The civil rights issues that people talk about today are what? Strip searching, supergrasses, shoot-to-kill, harassment by the security forces: all, all these issues, direct consequences of the existence of the campaign of violence in the North. The reason why the British government say they do these things is because there is a campaign of violence. If those who, like me, want to see an end to these infringements of human rights, really put human rights high on the list of priorities, then they should remove the reason, and leave the British government with no reason or justification whatsoever for the existence of these practices.

The British-Irish process is under way at the moment, and, of course, while it is under way it is not very wise for any

of us to say anything which might hinder it. We all recognise the difficulties which lie in the way, particularly when we know the history of failed initiatives in the North. I simply hope, like the rest of you I think, that the discussions will be fruitful and that we will be able to give the outcome of them our full support, and that people will be able to enter a new era in this country in which our patriotism will be defined by the sweat that we spill for our country, and not the blood which we spill for it. Thank you.