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ANGLO-IRISH TALKS AT SUNNINGDALE  
PARK, BERKSHIRE, 6th DECEMBER, 1973.

Opening statement by the Taoiseach, Mr. Liam Cosgrave T.D.

At the outset I should like to thank the Prime Minister and the British Delegation for the arrangements they have made for this conference, and the facilities they have placed at our disposal.

I should also like to express again to each of my fellow participants from Northern Ireland my congratulations on the spirit and patience they showed in reaching agreement in Belfast on 21 November last. I look forward to working with them and with the British Delegation around this table in the days ahead.

I think it right at the start as we begin our work together that I should set out in outline the approach which my Government and I take to the problems which confront all of us here. We will be discussing each issue over the next few days, and I promise that our approach to these discussions will be pragmatic and realistic. But I believe it is vital from the start to see that, in a larger sense, none of these issues can be approached piecemeal or dealt with in isolation. Our attitude and approach to each issue can only make sense if it is informed by a coherent overall idea of where we now stand in Ireland and in Anglo-Irish relations; and an equally clear general view of the needs which the present situation imposes on us.

- 2 -

It is true that this is a conference to which each of us brings particular concerns, interests and preoccupations on which we will wish to negotiate with each other. All of us elected representatives around this table speak for valid and identifiable interests in these negotiations. Each interest must be heard; and each must make its weight felt in everything we may decide together.

But it is not enough that each of us should have our particular demands met. Such an outcome to our talks may be desirable. But it will not be sufficient. What we all agree on here at the end of this conference must be a coherent and balanced response to the realities of the present situation in Ireland, I say to the present situation because we must avoid the pitfall of seeking by a settlement or formula devised here somehow to return to the situation as it was for many of us in the years gone by.

What is the essential problem of Northern Ireland and why should it be so persistent and so intractable?

We may disagree as to the reasons but I think it is at least common ground between all of us here that the fundamental problem has always been the absence, within the area, of political consensus. I speak here of that broad basic consensus within which other political, economic and social issues are decided in other societies by normal political means.

Northern Ireland at its creation was of course conceived as a response to the aspiration of a strong and coherent minority in Ireland who were devoted to the Union and unwilling to be submerged as a minority - however strong - in an independent Ireland.

But the establishment of Northern Ireland frustrated another aspiration - in Ireland as a whole; and it created another minority in Northern Ireland. Today, whatever any of us may think to be the legalities of the situation, two apparently incompatible aspirations focussed on religious affiliation still contend within that area.

- 3 -

It is this conflict of aspirations, aggravated by fears on both sides, which has kept the passions of history alive and prevented so far the growth of a basic political consensus within Northern Ireland. Guarantees and reassurances have not been enough. Each community is insecure because each knows that its position in relation to the other is still in question. Each sees that a definitive settlement now in favour of the other would finally frustrate its own aspiration and establish it definitively as "a minority" - within Northern Ireland in the one case, in a united Ireland in the other.

But the problem is not limited to Northern Ireland. The aspiration of the minority there is after all also an aspiration of a majority in Ireland as a whole; and, as we know to our cost, support for extremism, and the side effects of conflict and violence, are not easily confined within an area defined on a map. Every serious political tremor in Northern Ireland sends shock waves through the island - and, as I need hardly emphasise, through this island also - and all of us are affected.

How can we possibly hope to deal with this situation?

It is essential in my view to recognise first the problem as it really is - so that our response may be adequate to its complexity. I believe that all of us here are now ready to do this. Each of us in the past, in one sense or another, has tended to see the issue in simplistic terms. We have been too much concerned with catch cries and abstractions. But we have all - each in our own way - been chastened by the experience of recent years; and we have all now learned to accept that - short of mass conversion or mass repression of one or other aspiration in Ireland - there is no simple one-dimensional solution to the problem of Northern Ireland.

What is needed is a settlement which gets away from abstractions - gets back to the real and persistent problems of everyday life which press on and harass everyone living in our islands today. What we need is a settlement which will grow and develop in the right direction - towards a respect for the dignity of the person, the renunciation of violence, and the recognition that, in our world and for our generation, real progress can come only by the methods and through the institutions of democracy.

- 4 -

I am speaking of a settlement which fosters the growth of trust, in a situation where community fears are gradually eased, a degree of political consensus can develop, and support for violence on any side is reduced to that hard core who, in any society, resort to violence, not because they are driven to it by fear, uncertainty and political instability, but by choice.

To get under way this slow but essential process in Northern Ireland four things are necessary in my view:

first, political institutions which, by their nature, will promote and encourage the growth of consensus where none has previously existed;

second , a sincere effort to ensure that those instruments of Government which most affect people in their daily lives are such that they will not present any positive obstacle to identification with basic institutions;

third, scope within those basic institutions for different community aspirations, so that the conflict between them may be eased as each community is persuaded to confide its hopes to the pragmatic processes of administration, discussion and argument, for the social and material benefit of all;

fourth, when such institutions have been worked out, a resolute and determined effort by political leaders on all sides to persuade their people to accept them and give them their full support.

It is precisely to the extent that these needs of the situation can now be met that I see some ground for hope in the present situation. The major parties in Northern Ireland, for so long representing opposing positions, have found a way forward in the power-sharing concepts of the new Assembly and administration. But will the process be successful if it is confined to Northern Ireland? Can it be achieved within that area alone?

Let me say at once that I believe it cannot; and let me stress that in saying this, I am not being argumentative or provocative. I say it for reasons intrinsic to the situation in Northern Ireland itself as I have described it, and without reference for the moment to any aspiration which exists in the rest of Ireland - though I do not overlook that - or to any policy which it may be within the power of my Government to pursue.

- 5 -

Precisely because the central issue within Northern Ireland has always been the conflict of basic aspirations there, scope must now be provided for each aspiration - if there is to be genuine coming together of those who hold such differing long-term aims. This means that an important aspect of the promotion of trust within Northern Ireland must be a corresponding effort to promote trust, friendship and understanding between North and South. To be really successful, the new Northern Ireland institutions need the support of an institutional link between North and South of such a nature that it <sup>too</sup> will encourage people to work together pragmatically on matters of common interest. On this level too it is vital that contending community aspirations should not be repressed but offered scope to develop. And on this level too it will be necessary for political leaders to make a determined effort to win acceptance throughout the island for the settlement which is now to be devised.

What I am saying is quite simply that all of us in Ireland should cease for the moment trying to determine for our children and our children's children, the exact kind of political institutions they will wish to live under in their day especially since our past attempts to do so have seemed to promise only new difficulties for them. Instead - if we can now get the right political structures established throughout the island, providing scope now for differing aspirations and capable of development precisely to the extent to which time may reconcile those differences - then we should commit ourselves whole-heartedly and with trust to those structures. This would mean getting a process under way which will have no predetermined outcome in the sense that we need not try to decide now on the exact shape of the final result. Instead we should let each stage evolve from the preceding one, recognising that we live in a rapidly changing world and, in particular, that we are members of a European Community which is itself evolving and developing new relationships as between the countries comprising it, for the social and economic benefit of all its people.

Our conflicts in Ireland for the most part relate to the past or to the future. But the past is past and the future is an abstraction. All we have to build on, and live in, is the present - the reality of the present. When issues are approached pragmatically and with understanding it is surprising what we can agree about in the present. We had evidence of this

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- 6 -

practical and pragmatic approach, if I may say so, in the acceptance by the Northern leaders here present of an economic and social programme for the future Executive.

The people of Ireland, North and South, have spoken to us as clearly as any electorate can. In several separate elections this year in each part of Ireland - local and Assembly elections in the North, the General Election and recent bye-election in the South - they have had an opportunity to show their support for violence or for those who condone it. Instead, whatever else divides them, they have shown clearly their rejection of violence and a general will for a political settlement.

An electorate cannot easily specify the form of a political settlement they want. What they can do is choose political representatives to speak for different political interests among them, and expect those leaders to come together to work out a settlement which the electorate can accept and support.

As I see it that is what we are about here.

Our task as elected leaders from both parts of Ireland - and from the United Kingdom - is to respond to the clearly expressed, but still general, support for a political settlement of conflict in Ireland. We must help to consolidate and then build further, on the base laid in Belfast in recent weeks, by working out in detail political accord and institutions which will meet the evident needs of the Irish situation. To this process all parties to the present talks must contribute positively and even generously. If we do, then all those who seek to work by political means for what they want to achieve can commit themselves to them.

I am under no illusion that this will end violence now.

But it will reduce support for violence to those who really want violence; and I am confident that they are but a small minority.

- 7 -

I have felt it necessary to provide this brief general outline of our views on the present situation in Ireland as a broad general framework within which our discussion of detailed issues, and our attitude on each of them, must be understood.

What I have been saying essentially is that in a real sense, the agenda for this conference has not been put together piecemeal in response to the particular demands of each of the parties here present. It has been set for all of us by the needs of the present situation and the lessons we have all learned in regard to it; its items are all linked; and each makes sense only in relation to every other.

While we may talk of its order or its wording, these are not the issues. It is the realities behind the words and behind our talks today that are important. I would stress that we as elected representatives of the people are not meeting here in opposition to each other in the ordinary sense but with a fundamental unity of interest in making the processes of democracy work in the spirit of co-operation and respect for the aspirations of the interests we represent. Let me say now on behalf of my Government that, with goodwill all round we can probably go a long way towards meeting the preoccupations of those whose concern is with the attitude of the Republic towards Northern Ireland.

The clear need in Ireland at present, briefly stated, is:

- institutions which will encourage and promote trust and co-operation in the sense which I have explained;
- effective measures to sustain and defend those institutions once they are established; and
- acceptance of those institutions by all of us and by all in the island of Ireland.

If we succeed a further need will remain. It is important that each of us try to bring those we represent - widely as they may differ at present in outlook - to commit themselves wholeheartedly to this settlement as a way of easing fears and resolving old conflicts; and we must ask them too, to confide to it their aspirations and hopes. I say now as clearly and

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- 8 -

emphatically as I can that I and my Government will do all we can to make what we agree in the next few days work for the good of all in our small island. We come here in a spirit of co-operation.

I pray God that, in years to come, they - and their children - will have cause to thank us all for what we will do at this conference.