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IRELAND



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Extract from Airey Neave Memorial Lecture by

Mrs. Margaret Thatcher, 3 March 1980

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That experienced, thoughtful and valiant fighter for freedom was brutally killed at the end of March 1979, within the precincts of the House of Commons which he loved so well, and where he had so many friends in all parties. That murder, of course, appalled and angered all those friends and the many, many others whom he had throughout the nation.

It shocked too all those survivors of Hitler's war to whose cause Airey had devoted so much of his time since 1945.

Airey's death was a severe blow to me. I had come to value his friendship and advice very greatly. That terrible crime may have been intended to disrupt the election. It did not do so. For whatever the sorrow and grief, we were all determined that the election should go ahead normally. The cause which the murderers claimed to support was not advanced in any way by their barbaric violence.

We steadfastly refused to allow this accumulation of menaces to trap us into intolerance. The challenge which the IRA has been mounting against our political system in Northern Ireland is still being contained by the patience, stoicism and courage of Northern Irish people with the Army and ^{the} Royal Ulster Constabulary in the front line. We often use adjectives such as "heroic" too loosely, but the endurance of Ulstermen and women, in the face of danger, and over so long, fully entitles them to that designation. We should remember that tonight, as we remember Airey. Nor should we forget that, whenever the terrorists have struck in the homeland of Britain itself, they have met a united response from a nation which has shown once more that, when faced by a clearly identifiable menace, it can respond with wisdom and fortitude.

/Despite these...

Despite these years of bloodshed in Ulster, the IRA are no closer to achieving their aims. It is recognised in the Irish Republic and elsewhere that there has always been a clear majority of the population of Northern Ireland which continues to want to remain part of the United Kingdom. A survey carried out in 1978 and published by the Economic and Social Research Institute of Dublin clearly showed that ~~three-quarters~~ ^{wished} of all the people of Northern Ireland, including nearly half the Catholics, ~~to~~ ^{wished} to retain their links with the United Kingdom. The moral of those findings is worth pondering very seriously. No democratic country can voluntarily abandon its responsibilities in a part of its territory against the will of the majority of the population there. We do not intend to create any precedent of that kind.

I hope that the Conference which is now being held in Belfast under the Chairmanship of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland will suggest ways whereby the people of Northern Ireland can, within the United Kingdom, exercise greater responsibility over their own affairs. They want and deserve that opportunity.

We are ^{all} conscious of the contribution by Irishmen from North and South to politics and literature over many centuries. Where would even British Conservatism be without the great Edmund Burke, or English literature without Sheridan, Shaw, Joyce and Wilde? Englishmen and Irishmen alike have been inspired by Yeats, so that many Irish placenames like Innisfree or Kiltartan Cross are well known to us even if we have never been to that country.

Nor can we forget the contribution of soldiers from both parts of Ireland in the great wars of this century. In the Second World War 165,000 nationals of the Republic fought for democracy; 750 of them were decorated, of whom eight were awarded the Victoria Cross. The part played by the great Irish Generals: Alanbrooke, Alexander, Montgomery, Templer and others, was beyond compare.

/Despite....

Despite our differences over the years, relations between the Republic of Ireland and Britain are still closer than those of most independent sovereign states.

Our common membership of the European Community has added an extra dimension to this connection. . . . On the basis of this and our shared past I believe that the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland will build a future in friendship.