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Address by the Minister for Foreign Affairs

Mr. Peter Barry T.D. to Anglo-Irish Parliamentary Group

Westminster, 26 July 1983

Embargo: 5.00 p.m.

I would like to express my thanks to Mr. Mates and Mr. McNamara and to the members of the Anglo-Irish Parliamentary Group for your kindness in organising this occasion on a very busy day in Parliament. I understand that the Group has not met for some time. Our meeting today is, I believe, a symbol of the revival of Anglo-Irish relations which our two Governments are happily in the process of normalising.

My visit to Britain has three purposes. As usual I have had talks with the Foreign Secretary and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. I have also had meetings with the Irish Communities in Birmingham, Liverpool and London and brought to them a message of encouragement from Ireland about our hopes for the improvement of Anglo-Irish relations. As you know, the state of our relations is of great interest and importance to Irish people living and working in this country. We in Ireland are proud of the contribution being made by the Irish to the life and prosperity of your country and we regard the hundreds of thousands of Irish people living in your midst as an important resource for both countries in retaining good relations. May I add that we also regard with a special

affection the smaller but, for our country, relatively large British community in Ireland and we have recently published a Bill to enfranchise your citizens in Ireland.

My purpose on this occasion is to pay my respects to the Members of Parliament and in particular to those Members most interested in Ireland, in fact yourselves. I regard this as being extremely important in the present circumstances of our two countries. Our relations have gone through a difficult patch and they are now being fully normalised at the level of Government. That in itself is desirable progress but it is not enough. I think it is important that the dialogue between our two Governments should be rooted firmly in our democratic institutions. Democracy is the principal political value shared by our two countries despite all the vicissitudes in our relations. As danger or instability or extremism threaten us on one side or on the other, the democratic process is ultimately the only true hope of stability and of friendship between Britain and Ireland. Let us take care to involve our democratic institutions fully in the exchanges between Ireland and Britain.

My greatest concern now is in fact for the cause of the democratic process in Northern Ireland. I feel sure that many in this Parliament share this anxiety. We have recently witnessed in elections in Northern Ireland a process of alienation working in the minority community in a way which shocked and depressed many who had hoped to see peaceful progress towards stability in that strife-torn community.

Democrats in Britain and in Ireland must be alarmed to see a section of the minority in Northern Ireland - admittedly only a minority within the minority - turning in fairly significant numbers to give their support to those whose stated objective it is "to take power in Ireland with the ballot paper in one hand and the armalite in the other". These are the words of a lieutenant of Mr. Gerry Adams who himself began a recent speech in Ireland with the words "Follow gunmen and gunwomen". This brazen formula will stir frightening memories in some of us: memories of violence and cruelty in the Germany and the Italy of the thirties.

Democrats in both countries must resolutely resist this blatant fascism. Neither the British nor the Irish people will readily forgive those who wish to give such sentiments a hearing; much less will they forgive those who live in relative security far from the misery and the danger of Northern Ireland but who for reasons of publicity or theatricality or well-intentioned wrong-headedness lionise Mr. Adams and his fellow gunmen and his fellow gunwomen. To those who would take that tragically misconceived course, the overwhelming majority of the people of Ireland would say: "Ireland has suffered enough!"

But it is not enough for democrats to condemn Mr. Adams and his henchmen or to lament the fact that the cause of the armalite has found support amongst some voters in Northern Ireland. It is the duty of democrats in our two countries to ask "Why is

this so?" and fearlessly to act to reverse this dangerous tide. We must act to save the democratic process.

Why are some of the nationalist people, who through years of discrimination, suffering and confusion held by and large to a hope of political progress through the ballot box alone, turning now in another direction? Surely it is not because they think that Mr. Adams can solve the problem of Northern Ireland when it is obvious, particularly to people in Northern Ireland, that he and his supporters have only made matters worse and continue to make matters worse. It is true that a number of factors, such as the intimidation of voters and personation, account for a significant number of votes cast for Mr. Adams's party. I fear, however, that we must look elsewhere for the true answer.

I believe that the reality is that these disaffected people are beginning to lose faith in the political process through repeated frustration of their hopes. So often their expectations of real progress, of a power sharing executive, of a meaningful institutional Irish dimension, have been raised as have ours, only to be cruelly dashed by events. In the circumstances of Northern Ireland this breeds alienation and despair. It must be said that the hunger strike episode was seen very differently by many nationalists in Ireland and particularly in Northern Ireland from the way in which it was viewed in London and more than anything else it served to reinforce the mood of hopelessness. Herein lies the

explanation to my mind of this grave development. It is our job - the job of our two democracies working together - to restore confidence in the democratic process in Northern Ireland.

For our part we have taken an important step in this direction. I suspect from what I have seen in one of your leading dailies in recent days that the purposes of the New Ireland Forum are not yet widely understood in this country. The New Ireland Forum is not a political gambit nor is it an exercise in nationalist self-indulgence. It is at once a serious response to this threat to democracy and a serious attempt to confront the problems we all face in Northern Ireland.

May I say that, just as the major challenge to Irish nationalists is to take on board the real fears and preoccupations of the Unionists of Northern Ireland - and I hope we will successfully attempt this as part of our work in the Forum - so the challenge to Britain is to confront the similarly irreducible reality of the large nationalist minority in Northern Ireland. It is the responsibility of all who avow democracy to work towards a system which would allow adequate expression to both of these realities, neither of which can be wished away or forced away.

Both Parliaments are in their first months of existence. Both Governments enjoy the resolution and energy which, despite the exhausting work of a campaign, invariably animate newly elected or re-elected administrations. We share a deep commitment to democracy and, as it happens, we share a major threat to democracy in these islands. Let us live up to our heritage.