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Speech by the Taoiseach, Dr. Garret FitzGerald, T.D.,
at the First Meeting of the Forum for a New Ireland in
Dublin Castle on Monday, 30th May, 1983,
at 2.30 p.m.

Mr. Chairman,

Today we begin a unique attempt to bring peace and stability to this island by facing reality: the reality of the tragic and frightening crisis of Northern Ireland.

This is a critical occasion for the future of all the people of our island.

I say this for three reasons.

First, because the problem we face is of such fundamental importance to the well-being of every Irish man, woman, boy, girl; to the stability of society throughout this island: to

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our self-respect as human beings; and to our reputation in the world. Further, because, underlying all the issues that we must examine, is the right of people in this island to live, and not to be murdered, because of their birthright.

Second, this occasion is 'critical' because it is conceivable, although I believe unlikely, that we might fail: we might not succeed in holding together in our attempt to face reality; or we could simply get it wrong, because the problem might prove too daunting or too complex for our collective capacity. The price of such a failure could be to make a bad and dangerous situation worse; it is a price that would be calculated in human lives and in even deeper misery and despair. A heavy responsibility thus lies on every one of us in the New Ireland Forum.

Third, this is a 'critical occasion' because, should we together succeed in confronting reality - and I believe we shall - then we will have wrought a deep and permanent change in our own attitudes, collectively acknowledging the difficult problems which lie at the heart of unionist fears and distrust. In thus collectively and publicly facing the reality of these problems we will, for the first time, have laid the basis for a real dialogue. And, by facing reality together now, we will have laid the basis for then taking together the extremely difficult decisions which any resolution

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of this problem, bringing peace and stability to this island, will require. All of us, by thus coming together, have evidenced our intent to take this issue out from the area of party politics and to seek consensus.

Moreover, because it is a critical occasion for all of Ireland North and South, unionist and nationalist, it is necessarily also of vital importance to the people of Great Britain and their Government. They too must find the courage to face reality. Britain's failures hitherto have been our calamities. Our success now would be their opportunity to help us to bring peace and stability to this neighbouring island, and enduring brotherhood to the relations between our two countries.

It was because of my conviction that we, the people of this State, have not sufficiently stirred ourselves to face reality, that I proposed the establishment of this Forum. In doing so, and in proposing terms of reference for it, I was concerned above all to ensure two things: first, that those terms of reference should contain nothing that could inhibit the co-operation of the democratic nationalist parties in this island; that this has been achieved is evidenced by our presence here today. And, second, that they should contain nothing that could make it difficult for people drawn from the majority section of the community in Northern Ireland to join in helping us with our work.

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Mr. Chairman, I would hope that any concerned person or group of people who have given serious thought to ways in which permanent peace and stability can be brought to this deeply divided island will give the Forum the benefit of their considered views. The more of us who attempt to face reality together, the more courage we will all have, to do what is necessary to achieve this end.

But, we here, all of us participating in the New Ireland Forum, and those we represent, are nationalists. And I believe that we of the nationalist tradition cannot tackle the most important and the most difficult part of our job without the help of people from the unionist tradition. We cannot hope to understand fully the position, or the problems, of that tradition unless that position and those problems are put to us directly by some of those concerned. How could it be to the benefit of any unionists that nationalists here and in Northern Ireland should not understand the unionist position?

I hope, therefore, that unionists will keep an open mind on our efforts and that some from that tradition will present their viewpoint here; they too will soon see that we are in earnest, and that we seriously

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wish to learn from them; and perhaps as we give growing evidence of this fact, they too will consider joining in the process of confronting us with the authentic unionist voice.

The Nationalists of Northern Ireland have for generations suffered the most miserable lot of any section of the people of this island. It is an extraordinary tribute to their fortitude, and indeed to their charity, that, despite discrimination, repression and the endless smothering of their hopes, they have remained preponderantly opposed to extremism and violence, and committed to democracy. I believe that the exercise that we are now embarking upon will strongly reinforce the resolution and the fortitude of the sorely tried nationalist people of the North. The fact that their point of view is directly represented among us here is a major guarantee that this Forum will not shirk the challenges posed by this exercise in facing reality and that we will make real progress. Despite all the horror, despite the killings and the intimidation, and the successive failures of British policy, the democratic nationalists of Northern Ireland are, after all, right to retain their faith in the future. It seems to me that we in the South can learn from them: we should hope and believe more in the possibility of progress. We often talk of the need to secure the consent of the Northern unionists; perhaps we need first to secure the real consent and commitment of the South, a consent based on a true

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awareness of the political and economic realities, and not on myth or on bravura, or on chauvinism. I believe that we in this part of Ireland will achieve this true awareness through the Forum.

Mr. Chairman, all of the political parties in the New Ireland Forum will in effect, for a period of months, be sacrificing some of their interests and some of their independence. In deciding to do so our parties have demonstrated an awareness of the deepening crisis in Northern Ireland, and a willingness to put country before party. This is an encouraging augury for the success of our work. By this decision our parties, which are supported by the votes of well over 90% of the nationalist people, demonstrate on behalf of those they represent a powerful collective rejection of murder, bombing and all the other cruelties that are being inflicted on the population of Northern Ireland in an attempt to secure political change by force. Let the men of violence take note of this unambiguous message from the nationalist people of Ireland: the future of the island will be built by the ballot box, and by the ballot box alone.

Mr. Chairman, I hope I may be permitted to make a few general remarks as Leader of my Party, Fine Gael, about our hopes for the New Ireland Forum.

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At the outset I want to say that, given the scale of the tragedy of Northern Ireland as it has developed over the last fifteen years of violence, we believe that this Forum cannot hold back from examining any structures, any solutions, that might meet the essential requirement of giving expression to, and guaranteeing, the two Irish identities: the Irish/Irish identity of the nationalist tradition, which has found itself stifled within the structures of Northern Ireland, and the British/Irish identity of the unionist tradition, which fears that it would be stifled under any different structures.

Solutions to the intricate problem of Northern Ireland must be sought and structures must be found, which will be based not on preconceptions we may have inherited, but on our common assessment in this Forum of this problem as it presents itself here in the evidence we shall have to examine during the weeks and months ahead.

My Party believes that we should start our work with a completely open mind, but with a common determination to identify together all the key elements in the Northern Ireland crisis, and to provide honest and sensible answers to each of them. In our view it would be a tragic and indeed a fatal error to seek to pre-determine our findings, or in any way to attempt to say now what our eventual proposals will or will not contain.

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This task of hearing evidence, assessing it, and securing a consensus on the conclusions to be drawn from it, is, of course, an onerous one. In setting for our work a deadline of the end of the year we did not ignore this fact. But the crisis we are addressing is itself of extreme urgency, and if we are not seen to tackle it with this kind of deadline for the completion of our work, we should have no credibility with those who, in Northern Ireland, are suffering from its corrosive effects. Moreover, given that there will be a newly-elected Government in Britain, the early completion of our work is clearly desirable in order to facilitate the process of seeking jointly with that Government a review of policies with respect to Northern Ireland, which should not be delayed.

I want to say that we in Fine Gael have been in no way discouraged by the initial reactions, whether of cynicism, or of rejection on the part of unionist political parties in Northern Ireland. These initial reactions were to be expected; they will not prevent this Forum from succeeding in laying the groundwork for an eventual resolution of this intractable problem. On the contrary, we confidently believe that the spirit of generosity and hope which has characterised the approach of the Party leaders in preparing for today will remain the hallmark of our deliberations together, of our

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common approach to those who give evidence to us, and of our eventual report. In saying this I am thinking of a wise and noble insight of Thomas Davis:

"Conciliation of all sects, classes and parties who oppose us, or who still hesitate, is essential to moral force. For if, instead of leading a man to your opinions by substantial kindness, by zealous love, and by candid and wise teaching, you insult his tastes and his prejudices, and force him either to adopt your cause or to resist it - if, instead of slow persuasion, your weapons are bullying and intolerance, then your profession of moral force is a lie, and a lie which deceives no one, and your attacks will be promptly resisted by every man of spirit."

I have often said that the heart of this issue is the existence in Northern Ireland of two senses of identity - the Irish/Irish sense of identity of the nationalist minority, and the British/Irish identity of the unionist majority. I believe that the existing political structures in Northern Ireland fail to accommodate these two identities, because they ignore completely the identity of the nationalist minority.

At the same time the aspiration to Irish unity, as it has traditionally been enunciated in the vaguest of terms, has been no more accommodating with respect to the identity of the unionist majority; this aspiration has indeed been seen by them as threatening their very existence.

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The most difficult task we will face in this Forum will be the search for structures that would accommodate both these senses of identity and thus secure peace and stability.

There are, of course, other extremely important questions: ideological, political, religious and economic. So far as we are concerned, the agenda excludes nothing. Indeed it is essential for the success of the New Ireland Forum that it establish its credibility by being seen courageously and squarely to face up to all the difficult issues which confront the nationalist tradition today. The price of failure would be, as I said, far too high in human terms for any shirking to be permissible on our part.

In conclusion, I believe that the New Ireland Forum can and will be a great force for good in the conflict between life and death that is joined in Northern Ireland. In that conflict all of us here are ranged on the side of life. For myself and my Party, it will be a great privilege to play our part.

Mr. Chairman, I wish you well in the difficult task you have undertaken, and can assure you of my party's full support in all you may propose for the effective operation of this Forum. I wish to express my gratitude to you for your immediate willingness to take on this responsibility when asked by the four Party leaders to do so.

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Through you I extend good wishes for the success of our joint endeavour to Dick Spring, Charles Haughey and John Hume.

Working together under your Chairmanship for real and lasting peace and stability in Ireland, we can set an example to the world of the courage, the generosity, the imagination and the intellectual honest and sound good sense of the Irish people.

With God's help, we will succeed.