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FOR INFORMATION

TEXT OF ARTICLE FOR SERIES
"THE WAY FORWARD"
IN BELFAST NEWSLETTER
BY THE MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS
MR. DAVID ANDREWS, T.D.,

26 MARCH 1992

I greatly welcome this opportunity to contribute to the Ulster Newsletter.

I am of course aware that many of your readers will object that I should have no place in a series called "Answers for Ulster". To judge from the logo accompanying these articles, Ulster is a small island, bordered by sheer perpendicular cliffs, particularly on the Southern side. Newsletter readers may feel it should have little relevance for the Foreign Minister of a country which they see mentioned in their paper, if at all, only under the safely distancing guise of "Eire".

Yet, as we all know only too well, the reality is less easy to conjure out of existence. The conflict in Northern Ireland affects issues of life and death, which everyone in this island has a moral duty to confront. It raises profound questions of identity and political legitimacy which affect both parts of Ireland. It has diminished Irish people in our relations with each other and tarnished, to some extent, almost every area of our endeavour. It threatens the future well-being of everyone on this island in ways it would be deeply unwise to ignore. We need an answer for Ireland, and not just for Ulster.

Each tradition in Ireland has indulged in the wishful dream that the other did not exist, or existed only in ways convenient for our respective myths. Those two dreams have produced a nightmare in Northern Ireland. Those who live there need no reminder from me of what has been suffered already. They know better than anyone else the sheer evil of the many terrible actions which have been perpetrated on one side or the other, ostensibly for an ideal but with ever more naked sectarian impulse on both sides. They can see the damage to the social fabric caused by ingrained habits of lawlessness and violence. Terrorism has rooted in the spaces left by our political failure, and we ignore this sinister development at our peril.

What, then, is the way forward? I believe the first step is a resolve never to accept the conflict in Northern Ireland as in

some way inevitable. We must never resign ourselves to allowing another generation to repeat the fate of the last twenty three years. The conflict is a product of factors which we can identify and which we can collectively influence, even if we cannot fully control. If we repeat the mistakes of the past - and we can see from our present predicament that they were abundant on all sides - we can expect no very different result from the present one. We must turn to our past, not as an arsenal for argument and recrimination, but to learn from our mistakes and failures.

The Unionist and nationalist traditions in Ireland have never addressed truthfully and realistically their relationships with each other. Indeed the occasions of genuine dialogue between them in this century have been scandalously low and could be counted on one hand. A process of mutual discovery is long overdue. An honest and respectful analysis of all traditions on the island is an essential pre-condition for any attempt to find a way forward. No-one has a right to tell the man from Cullybackey that his sense of loyalty, or his memories of the Somme, or his refusal of the nationalist tradition as it has presented itself to him, is either illogical or wrong. It is wise to assume that these sentiments are deep and sincere, and that they are realities which cannot be wished out of existence. We must however extend no less consideration to the man from Cullyhanna, and acknowledge that his sense of nationalist identity, and his refusal of traditions perceived as hostile and alien, are no less logical or sincere. To deny that reality would, equally, be a false starting point.

We have good grounds for hope that after the British general election a process of political dialogue can resume which will address all of the relationships involved in the problem. The two Governments, and the political leaders in Northern Ireland, owe it to all their peoples to avail of this historic opportunity to resolve this last legacy of our troubled history, which has produced such bitter fruit in Northern Ireland. On behalf of the Irish Government I can pledge that we are prepared to proceed

with openness and imagination in sustaining the search for a solution. Our objective must be to accommodate the two traditions in Ireland as they really are, and not as we would find it convenient for them to be. We must seek to build on, rather than undermine, the progressive gains which have been made in British-Irish relationships. We must have the courage to move from the margins to the real issues at stake, even at the risk of entering deep and possibly uncharted waters.

In this process the role of Unionist political leaders will be of particular significance. I know they must take account of the deep and understandable anger in their community at the many murders and criminal attacks wantonly inflicted on so many of its members. I know there is a sense of isolation and pessimism at the erosion in the course of our century of some of the bulwarks of Unionism which seemed so solid at its beginning. There is a temptation in such circumstances to turn inwards and to regard all political movement as inherently dangerous. I believe that would however be a profoundly mistaken response, with damaging consequences for both traditions in Ireland and I greatly welcome the courageous decision by Unionist leaders to set their feet on the path to dialogue.

The measure of peace in our island will be the depth of our understanding on how we share it. To create that understanding is no easy task, and the cooperation of the Unionist community is vital for it to succeed. The shadow of history falls heavily across both traditions in Ireland. It has left each in possession of an array of symbols which, to the other, can all too often seem reminders of a hateful past or a future threat. We need to find ways in which these divisive symbols can be replaced by, or transformed into, emblems of mutual esteem. I am aware of course that our differences go beyond symbols, emotive as they are, and involve many practical issues. These too need to be resolved either through agreement, or agreement to differ.

In facing these formidable challenges we should not overlook our assets and advantages. There are great areas of common ground

between both parts of Ireland, as indeed between Ireland and Britain. There are traditional bonds in many important areas of life which we all continue to cherish and which have never been affected by political divisions. We share a common interest in the welfare and prosperity of both parts of this island, and in mutually beneficial economic cooperation between them. The context of the problem, too, is altering. We are living through times of unprecedented change in human society and political structures alike. The development of European Union promises to transform our political and economic environment, to the point that the President of the European Commission recently estimated that before long some eighty per cent of the decisions affecting our daily lives will be taken in that forum. It is difficult in those circumstances to treat issues of sovereignty in the spirit that might have been justified a hundred years ago. It is difficult to regard borders as absolute in a Community dedicated, with every prospect of success, to abolishing their entire practical significance. The Community can be an enabling factor, offering new points of reference, new possibilities free of the connotations of the past. It can also be a motivating factor, as it brings to the fore new and shared interests in the context of European Union.

I believe there is everywhere among the peoples of these islands a strong tide of public support for political dialogue. There is a manifest desire for a new departure in Ireland which will mark a decisive break with past dissensions. I believe all political leaders, indeed all those with any degree of influence on the political process, have a duty to respond.
