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11 September 1993

Attached is an extract from a speech given by the Rt Hon Sir Patrick Mayhew QC MP, at the British Irish Association Conference at Newnham College, Cambridge on 11 September 1993.

We meet at an extraordinarily significant and exciting time for the affairs of Ireland, North and South. In the last two and a half years there has been political movement towards an agreed solution of the Northern Ireland problem, where for many years there had been stasis. It may be difficult to discern at times, but it is as if the continental plates on which we all stand have been grinding and shifting.

The context in which this movement has occurred has been the political talks process. I say process to encapsulate the entire effort of the last two and a half years or so, and to distinguish it from the two specific sets of round table discussions which have taken place.

The first set of round table discussions took place in 1991. They broke the ice between participants, but ended without agreement. The second set of round table discussions, in 1992, went much further.

The outcome of last year's round table discussions was a real degree of progress and agreement. It was most marked in Strand I, but the prospect of real progress could be discerned in Strand II also.

The Talks closed on 9 November because, for complex reasons, time had run out. It is widely held that they had failed, but they had not "failed". Back in March 1991, with the announcement of agreement on the basis on which talks could proceed, Dr Paisley said that the door to the field had been opened, but there was now much hard ploughing before all of us. By 9 November last year,

part of the field indeed remained unploughed. But part had been well and truly ploughed, and where no plough had gone before.

It was undoubtedly a disappointment to many that we could not finish the job then. But the challenge to us all is to get onto the land again and finish the job. Now the question arises whether success is even a possibility, let alone a probability.

My answer is yes. I hear that I am given to whistling in the dark. So don't take my word. Sir Ninian Stephen, ^{who presided over Strand 213} in his statement at the closing of last year's round table discussions, said that the objectives of the process, in his view, remained valid, and continued to be achievable. Nothing in the months that have followed has made invalid any factor upon which he can have founded that opinion.

But the process calls for a joint and several act of will from the participants. Does that will to try exist? Let me tell you what the two Governments agreed yesterday. In trenchant language they reaffirmed their aim of a comprehensive political settlement which would address all the main political relationships; those within Northern Ireland, those within the island of Ireland and those between the two governments. They agreed to continue to cooperate closely and actively to promote political progress by every possible means. They underlined the urgency and importance of the search for political agreement. Both sides, they said remain convinced that the objectives of the talks process, as set out in the statement of 26 March 1991, are valid and achievable."

The British Government is wholeheartedly and fervently committed to the task, and we will not lift our hand from the plough now. Yesterday's Intergovernmental Conference demonstrated there is no daylight between us and the Irish Government here.

What, however, of the parties? I, of course, can relay only my impression. But it is my clear impression that the will is there in sufficient measure among them too.

Let me assure you this is not because I have been listening to a tune I have whistled encouragingly in the dark. It is true that during the Spring and the Summer there have been no round table Talks. But the process itself has remained very much alive. Both Michael Ancram and I have continued our political discussions with the constitutional parties in Northern Ireland, just as we of course continue to meet with the Irish Government. From all that we have heard in those discussions, I find three important things.

First, a unanimous consensus that the status quo is not a viable option. Everyone wants to find a settlement.

Second, a general recognition of significant areas of agreement in the 1992 round table Talks, even if much of it was only on a contingent basis. There is much interest in seeing how much could be bankable, and what obstacles there may be to achieving more.

Third, even among those who consider that now is not the time to convene further round table Talks, much consequential support^{is there} for discrete bilateral discussions, primarily with the British Government, for those purposes.

In this insight I do not think we are ahead of the field. As both Governments agreed yesterday, we must "... continue to seek common areas of agreement and to explore scope for further flexibility with all the parties concerned."

Here let me warmly endorse Dick Spring's assertion last night that it is axiomatic that no accommodation can take hold in Northern Ireland without the consent of the two communities there.

Consent towards consent that cannot consent and feel that

The exploration of flexibility calls for three qualities. Urgency, because we cannot allow hope of political progress to die. Patience, because there is no point in artificial deadlines which risk stifling this delicate plant just as it begins to grow. But, above all, flexibility. If a solution is to be found, it will be no-one's ideal. All

the participants need to consider what scope for flexibility they have.

and that includes the Government (3-4 months speak) etc (conference today)

That is what Michael Ancram will be exploring as he meets different parties in Northern Ireland. It is what both Governments will need to explore together, and urgently, ^{in urgent} over the next weeks.

Our object is to draw up an overall board for the negotiation stage, so as to permit, when it does become appropriate, the reconvening of full round table Talks with a strong chance of swift and positive success. For my part, I fully acknowledge the duty of Government to give focus and direction to the process when that stage is reached, and a clear account of our best judgement of what should

*of talks part
how they have
neglected all
that we did off
Not to point
out of
initial in
just focus
+ direction*

command general acceptance. *I've hated it to be honest and it's hard - that's what it has a space other - and we've been urged to do sooner. It's not about it to give sense to it, probably a watercourse. Secondly we be strong incentive for people to be seen to do for the good of the nation and the people.*

I wish I could report to you that all the previous participants are of the same mind in this connection. But you know that I cannot. The DUP find themselves at present unable to explore these matters with us. I wish they would: we must see how events unfold. Nevertheless, I can report to you not only my belief that the objectives of the Talks process remain valid, and that their achievement remains a possibility; I can report in addition that there is rational, and not self deluding, ground for hope that that possibility will be fulfilled in an agreed settlement.

This, however, is not founded alone upon the indications so far given to Michael Ancram. It is founded additionally on what I perceive as a new insistant demand by everyday people that the politicians don't give up talking. ^{Realistic - should be} I find this right across the community. Everywhere - and I include working class Protestant areas - I hear words like "There has got to be compromise". This perception finds some confirmation in the opinion polls taken after the Opsahl Commission reported. It is my belief that the intensity of this demand is quite new in character: it has not been seen before. I do not think the people will be content for it to be ignored.

We had done after the talks, a survey of people and made changes to it

Of course it is the case that the two Governments themselves are not exempt. Exploration and definition is incumbent on us too. I agree with what Dick Spring said yesterday quoting Jim Molyneux:

".... there are issues which are really for decision by the two Governments and the wider entities, just as there are

decisions, for example co-operation in any devolved structures, which are for the Northern communities alone."

This conference knows that constitutional matters are of high importance to the quest on which we have all engaged. They must in the first instance be for the two Governments to explore. Yet though their place lies within Strand III, they form a bridge between each Strand. This is because, as we have seen, ^{a particular party's} one party's approach to agreeing how to reach a new beginning to relationships within Northern Ireland, can depend on whether the Irish Government undertake to seek to change articles 2 and 3, and ^{if so} in what circumstances. Equally, the prospects of the Irish people ^{based on the} agreeing to such constitutional change in a referendum may depend on the what is capable of agreement by other participants.

Accordingly it is necessary, if reliable signals are to be received from the discreet bilateral exploratory process I have described, for the Governments to get down to particulars too. Otherwise the product of much patient work may ultimately be undermined or wasted: and, most importantly, the entire process delayed. Northern Ireland can afford no delay. Here then is an area of most urgent obligation for both Governments. When Paul Bew conceded this morning that he had made no reference to Talks papers emanating from Strand III, in an otherwise singularly well-documented address spanning Strands I and II, an explanation may have suggested itself to you.

There is work here for both Governments to do, then, if we are to discern clearly what kind of overall settlement may prove

● acceptable to all. We ourselves need to achieve the flexibility we enjoin upon our colleagues, and also the courage. I warmly endorse Dick Spring's perception, in last night's speech, that to piece the jigsaw together (of which all the constituent parts he sensed were available) we need above all fresh thinking. But I would add, as I know he would, that fresh thinking alone is not enough. There now needs to be a product.

↓
I don't think the income tax rise, by itself a reg. of emp.,
tech. hist. increase, prescript. cost etc.

I conclude with words written by economists for the first time

- Foundations build
- Let common will work (understand need & degree)
- Those who are ~~not~~ prepared, do some preparation
they demand it