



An Chartlann Náisiúnta
National Archives

Reference Code: 2021/95/22

Creator(s): Department of the Taoiseach

Accession Conditions: Open

Copyright: National Archives, Ireland.
May only be reproduced with
the written permission of the
Director of the National
Archives.

✓

SPEECH BY DICK SPRING TD
Tánaiste, Minister for Foreign Affairs
in the Dáil Debate on Northern Ireland
Wednesday 27th October, 1993

This debate arises from the events that caused such horror and shame in Belfast this past week-end. In speaking here, I want to speak as openly, as dispassionately, and as frankly as I can about the events and what they mean.

In the few days since this House last met, fifteen people have died, in one of the bloodiest few days in the history of Northern Ireland. Those victims have come from both communities, and form a part of the escalating spiral of violence and hatred which must concern us all.

I have to say that it is almost impossible to find the words that would adequately describe the revulsion, indeed the despair, that I felt when news of the Shankill massacre reached me on Saturday afternoon. Yet another place name to be added to the dark history that has been accumulating in the last couple of years alone - another to stand beside names like Warrington, Castlerock, and Teebane Cross.

Yet another community, with more than its fair share of troubles already, has been added to the list of those who must cope with trauma and bitterness. Yet more families, to add to the thousands in both communities and from both islands, have been left to suffer the bottomless agony of loss. And left with the bitterest feeling of all - that there is no point, no meaning, no purpose, to the violent deaths of their loved ones.

The most savage irony of the Shankill massacre lies in two facts. First, the victims of that massacre were blown to pieces on the orders of people who believe, or say they believe, in the right of the Irish people to self-determination. Second, the people who authorised that massacre are the same people who, just about a week ago, issued a public statement proclaiming their support for a peace process.

There is no one on this island more committed to peace, who practices democracy with more conviction, honesty, and integrity, than John Hume. The initiative that he has taken, with a view to finding a pathway towards peace, is potentially one of the most significant pieces of the jigsaw of recent years.

If the provisional IRA have done nothing else by their actions of last weekend, they have made it far more difficult to find the basis on which we might be able to proceed with, and to develop, that initiative, combining it with the other elements essential to a lasting peace.

But we cannot be deflected from the search for peace. We owe it to the thousands of people who have died before last Saturday, to those slaughtered on Saturday and on the days since, to the families who mourn them, to the communities who are the poorer for their loss, never to be turned away from the quest.

That does not mean, and it can never mean, surrendering or capitulating to men of violence on any side. To do that would be to negate the very democracy that John Hume and many others like him practice with such distinction and courage.

The democratic way forward must be founded on certain key principles. And if I attempt here to outline these principles, I do so not in any way to fudge the need for a negotiated and agreed approach.

In the final analysis, there can be no lasting settlement except through agreement between the Unionist and Nationalist traditions about how we can share this island, which is our common home, and where we both have our rights. The British and Irish Governments have major roles to play, and major responsibilities - but peace must come finally from within the hearts of the people who live in the shadow of violence.

In addition, in setting down principles, I am not attempting either to lay down preconditions for any negotiation. I make only one exception - the only people welcome at the negotiating table would be those who have foresworn violence.

Nobody can be expected to negotiate about their future, or the future of their community, with guns outside the door. Bombs and guns must be set aside if we are to avoid a recurrence of the horror and terror of the Shankill massacre, and the frightening aftermaths on Kennedy Way and elsewhere.

The democratic principles which can underpin a peace process, and which can be combined through negotiation and dialogue to secure sustainable peace, are simply set out.

Indeed, many of them are already encapsulated and contained in Article 1 of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, to which the Irish and British Governments remain fully committed. That Article solemnly enshrines the principle of consent. We can build on those principles by seeing them in the following way.

- First, the people living in Ireland, North and South, without coercion, without violence, should be free to determine their own future.
- Second, that freedom can be expressed in the development of new structures for the governing of Northern Ireland, for relationships between North and South, and for relationships between our two islands. For many of us, of course, the freedom to determine our own future by agreement should ideally lead to the possibility ultimately of unity on this island.
- Third, no agreement can be reached in respect of any change in the present status of Northern Ireland without the freely expressed consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland - free as I have said from coercion or violence.
- Fourth, let us once and for all accept here that if we talk about the freedom of Unionists to give their consent to constitutional change, we must also recognise the freedom of Unionists to withhold their consent from such change, unless and until they are persuaded by democratic political means only.

- Fifth, if we believe in consent as an integral part of any democratic approach to peace, we must be prepared at the right time and in the right circumstances to express our commitment to that consent in our fundamental law.

- Sixth, even in the aftermath of some of the most horrible crimes we have witnessed, we must be prepared to say to the men of violence that they can come to the negotiating table, that they can play a peaceful part in the development of Ireland's future - if only they would stop the killing and the maiming and the hurting. We will make a place, and we will develop structures, to bring in from the cold those who have lived in the shadow of their own terrorism - and we are prepared to begin that process the moment that a total cessation of violence makes it possible for us to do so.

The British Government has said repeatedly that it has no selfish or strategic interest in remaining in Northern Ireland. It has said that Britain is in Northern Ireland because the majority of Northern Ireland's people want it that way, and for no other reason. At the same time, the British Government has said that it will not yield to terrorism, nor bargain with it.

That is the way it is, and that is the way it is going to remain. I do not believe that the British Government has any objection, or could find anything to argue with, in any of the principles I have outlined above. I do not believe that any Unionist could, on calm reflection, find fault with any of these principles.

Above all, I do not believe that anyone who claims to be a modern nationalist or republican, could seriously reject any of these principles. They are more than a basis for peace, they are a basis for people working together for the good and the future of this whole island.

Ireland may remain divided by a border for years to come. What is vital is that we begin now to find ways of breaking down the barriers that are between us, rather than erecting new ones with more bombs and more atrocities.

Many of the activists of the provisional IRA have been involved in violence and terror for all of their adult lives. Many of them now have teenage children. They have a choice - they can condemn their children, and their children's children, to lives of violence and terror. Or they can stop.

If they were to stop now, it would re-establish, at least to some extent, the credentials of the peace process that they claim to have publicly endorsed. It would provide hope that politics can replace terror as a means of achieving political objectives. It would free their children from the shadow of the gunman, and empower them for the first time in their lives to contribute to the wellbeing of their own communities.

We are at a crossroads. If the horror of recent days is not to be the latest step in an ever-rising stairway of violence, then those involved must draw back. They must reflect now on the opportunity that is open, on the possibility that political action is a legitimate alternative for them. We can condemn, and I do condemn, the atrocities of recent times. But this is a time to appeal for reason and for hope. If the men of violence would only agree to give peace a chance the political future of Northern Ireland can be utterly transformed. I believe that all of us in this House should unite in saying - do it now.

To Unionists, I would say this. I believe that the two traditions on this island can work out a Covenant for our own times. What I envisage is a covenant of rights and guarantees, capable of being applied by agreement to every part of this island and to every aspect of the relationship between these islands.

It would provide an assurance for all time to every citizen on this island - Protestant or Catholic or Dissenter, Nationalist or Unionist - that basic political rights, including political identities, can be enshrined to ensure that nothing - even a change in sovereignty if such were ultimately arrived at by agreement and consent - could undermine them. Any accommodation between the two traditions on this island must be based on the principle that both identities must each have equally satisfactory, secure and durable political, administrative and symbolic expression and protection for their rights and identities.

The principle of equal respect for both traditions, of equal expression of allegiance, can be worked out in innovative ways, if we want to do it.

There is a heavy onus now on all who are democrats. Now is one of those moments in our history when we choose to go forward or backward. As someone who was elected, I believe, to speak on behalf of a new generation, I say we must go forward.

ends