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ADDRESS BY

THE TANAISTE AND MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS

MR. DICK SPRING, T.D.

TO THE IRISH ASSOCIATION

AT THE MANSION HOUSE

DUBLIN, 5 MARCH 1993

EMBARGO 1pm
CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Mr. Chairman, President and members of the Irish Association.

I am very pleased to have the opportunity to address this meeting of the Irish Association. I would like my presence here today to be seen as my personal tribute to the work of the Association. For more than fifty years it has provided a forum where Irish people of all shades of opinion can discuss and reflect on our relationships. We are all greatly in the debt of the many dedicated individuals who have worked quietly and without fanfare over the years to foster networks of human contact and dialogue across our self-imposed divides.

The mandate and the mission of this Government is change. That means more than the management of change. If this Government is to fulfil its mandate, it must be prepared to initiate change, to defend it, to help the people to prepare for it and to incorporate it into their thinking.

That challenge is nowhere more insistent than in relation to Northern Ireland. All the approaches which have been tried so far have manifestly failed in one way or another. But if change is needed, it is also feared by both communities, and understandably so, since the wrong kind of change could threaten the heritage and values so resolutely cherished on one side or the other.

In these difficult circumstances I believe the two Governments concerned have the clear duty to point the way. The British and Irish Governments ultimately share responsibility for the search for a solution that will bring peace to this island. We must cooperate with the fullest resources of energy and imagination in exercising that responsibility.

For my own part I readily acknowledge the responsibilities of the Irish Government in this regard. We do not have the option to stand aloof from a problem which so profoundly threatens the welfare of everyone on this island, and not just in Northern Ireland. Even if we had, it would be wrong and unworthy not to

make every contribution in our power to the search for peace and stability.

For all of us in Ireland this conflict is a tragic dissipation of our energies and opportunities. Its resolution would be the enabling condition for positive change in almost every area of our endeavour, North and South. It would be one of the greatest and most far-reaching benefits which could be conferred on the peoples of these islands. It is because of that conviction that I sought my present role in Government. I will use it to the utmost of my ability to achieve progress.

The problem of Northern Ireland is one of two sets of rights. The recent Talks confirmed for us that the position of each community is logical, justifiable and righteous in its own eyes. The dilemma is that, at the extremes and as traditionally stated, these two sets of rights are incompatible.

For that reason any new agreement will inevitably be a matter of painful political choice and must be forged in a difficult process of give and take. That will require on all sides, to paraphrase a famous prayer, the courage to change the things we can change, the strength to accept the things we cannot change, and the wisdom to know the difference.

We cannot change the legacies of history, or the facts of geography. The realities they dictate to us undermine many of our cherished dreams and most wishful thinking. Northern Ireland is not Yorkshire or Essex, serenely and unquestionably British in its character and destiny. Unionists are not lapsed members of the United Irishmen, waiting to snap out of a temporary aberration.

We may know these things in our hearts, but we fear to acknowledge them. We cannot change the reality that there are two traditions on this island, each strongly determined to

maintain its distinctive ethos and identity, and each deeply fearful of being the ultimate loser. We have a choice only about how we respond to these realities.

We can seek to evade them, but at a terrible price. Yeats' lines

"We had fed the heart on fantasies
The heart's grown brutal from the fare"

could well be carved over the gateway of every jail where young people from both communities waste out their lives, because they took to violent extremes the rejection by one tradition of the reality of the other.

The alternative path is to accept these realities. We can identify and, together, control all those tangles of disagreement from which so much pain has flowed. We can build new political arrangements on the reciprocal acceptance of our differences and on the rules we devise to manage them. Only in that way can we have any hope of peace.

I come from a particular tradition in relation to this whole issue. I strongly believe in the relevance, to this very day, of James Connolly's assertion - which can nowadays almost be seen as a prophecy - that:

"Ireland without her people is nothing to me, and the man who is bubbling over with enthusiasm for "Ireland", and can yet pass unmoved through our streets and witness all the wrong and suffering, the shame and degradation wrought upon the people of Ireland, aye, wrought by Irishmen upon Irish men and Irish women, without burning to end it, is, in my opinion, a fraud and a liar in his heart, no matter how he loves that combination of

chemical elements that he is pleased to call Ireland."

Is there any greater shame and degradation than the violence which has stained our island and which, all too often, is still "wrought by Irishmen upon Irish men and Irish women"? Those of us on both sides of the divide who burn to end that shame and degradation must be prepared to face any change, any compromise, that holds out the prospect of success.

It comes as no surprise that constitutional issues loomed large in the recent Talks. The unresolved dilemmas which shaped the arrangements of the 1920's still cast their shadows across the political landscape in both parts of Ireland. These issues are fraught with the deepest emotions of our history.

But unless we come to grips with them, they will continue to thwart, as they have done so far, every attempt to create the whole-hearted trust and understanding on this island which both traditions fervently wish to see in place, however different the paths they believe should be chosen.

I do not underestimate the scope of this challenge but I believe we must face it. The first step on the road to progress is to acknowledge each tradition in its integral reality. I would like to think that my own background and experience, and the Labour tradition which I represent, give me an understanding of both constitutional perspectives.

We will not understand the nationalist community in Northern Ireland until we recognise that the nationalist tradition has been profoundly conditioned by the fact that partition was introduced by British fiat.

Moreover, it was a bluntly territorial approach, designed to assign to one community the maximum area it could electorally

control, with scant pretence at any finer criterion of local wishes.

The subsequent failure to protect the nationalist community from the disabilities of the minority status suddenly thrust upon it reinforced at the level of everyday experience their conviction that Northern Ireland was created as a rearguard action against Irish self-determination, or as a contrivance against Irish nationalists.

I do not make these points for polemical purposes, but because I believe that the political effects of this perception are still powerfully active. They have generated a sense of grievance which is one side of the equation which must be addressed if we are to succeed in putting our relationships on a new basis.

We must show no less readiness, however, to acknowledge that the unionist tradition in Ireland is also profoundly conditioned by its historical experience, reinforced by the minority position of that community in Ireland as a whole. It is easy to forget that unionists, and particularly those of the Presbyterian faith, have their own historical reasons to fear ascendancy, and many now dread that it may come in nationalist guise.

Nationalists may feel certain that such fears are unfounded, but we must accept they are real. Let us remember also how many members of that community have been wantonly murdered or injured by people invoking - and so clearly profaning - the nationalist tradition. The Moderator of the Presbyterian Church spoke movingly to me a few weeks ago of the many recent monuments on church walls or in graveyards throughout Northern Ireland which stand in perpetual and reproachful witness to this suffering. Unionist fears in this respect at least are all too grimly justified.

The unionist community has seen many of the bulwarks of their position disappear in this century. They are deeply concerned that there may be no point of safety between where they now stand and the realisation of their worst fears. They suspect that all political movement must be to their detriment.

Our besetting failure on the nationalist side has been a persistent tendency to underestimate the depth and strength of the unionist identity. We are perhaps only now coming to terms with the full dimensions of this reality. We have amends to make for this failure, no less than others for theirs.

Our two traditions in Ireland cannot become frozen in a kind of sullen stalemate which allows terrorism to proliferate. The way towards a secure future for all of us lies in reasoned negotiation, the peaceful reconciliation of differences and agreement on structures which will safeguard the interests of both traditions.

We must be realistic about the difficulties. But let us also be realistic about the opportunities, and resolute in seizing them.

People on all sides now accept more widely than ever before that peace and stability will not be found in any political system which is rejected on grounds of ethos or identity by a significant minority of the people governed by it. That remains true for Ireland as a whole, no less than for Northern Ireland. We can build on the growing consensus throughout this island that the path to progress will not be found by denying or suppressing either of the conflicting aspirations. We must work instead for a comprehensive agreement on how we can reciprocally accept them both. We must in short eliminate our dissensions, not our differences.

We can harness also the growing public desire in both parts of the island for the old shibboleths to be laid to rest and for a

new and sensible accommodation to be worked out between us. There is an opportunity now for political leaders on both sides to redefine their aspirations and positions in the light of a new test, which, in reality, was always an essential one - that of compatibility with the rights of the other tradition on this island.

We have an asset too, if we will use it, in the considerable work done in the Talks process which ended inconclusively last November. That process confirmed that there was strong public support on all sides for comprehensive negotiations. It enabled each tradition to define for the other the full dimensions of its reality. It registered general acceptance that there could be no monopoly of power in any new internal institutions in Northern Ireland, even if their actual forms were not agreed. The need for meaningful North-South structures was not challenged in principle even if, again, agreement was not reached on their precise nature and functions.

Potential agreement on these points did not crystallise, essentially because both sides felt politically vulnerable in the absence of agreement on the constitutional issue, which inexorably overrides all other issues for both sides in Northern Ireland. That is the area of deepest division. Indeed, in a certain sense it is the only real division, separating all the parties to the problem.

In spite of the formidable difficulties I do not feel despondent about the possibility of progress.

The Anglo-Irish Agreement, to which both Governments are fully committed unless it is transcended by a new Agreement, has already codified a significant, even if not a complete, measure of understanding between the two Governments on the status of Northern Ireland.

It formally recognises that the consent of a majority of the people in Northern Ireland would be necessary for any change in its present status and it declares equally that if a future majority consents to the establishment of a united Ireland, the two Governments will give effect to that wish.

I believe new arrangements will develop rather than supersede this basic approach. It is the context and implications which remain to be defined and agreed.

We must on the one hand address the fear of the nationalist community that new arrangements might irrevocably seal a division between Irish people which the majority on this island would like to see overcome, or load the scales against the future realisation of nationalist aspirations under arrangements which could be agreed by all.

We must show that the political process is meaningful in terms of this goal, and that a true and free agreement between all Irish people is an ideal to be nurtured.

The more that is done the more the nationalist tradition can turn attention from the British role to a still more fundamental issue, namely the relationships in Ireland. Our historic challenge now is to show beyond all doubt that the nationalist commitment to the principle of majority consent is meaningful and genuine. If the nationalist tradition is the source of the deepest unionist fears, we must show that it can also become the source of their strongest guarantees.

Unionist leaders have said: "There is a simple and obvious way of meeting our wishes: Change your Constitution, particularly Articles Two and Three". There was much semantic debate about whether this "would" be done as a prior commitment or "could be done with the hope of success" as a consequential part of a package.

Let me make my own position clear. I have never argued that Articles Two and Three of our Constitution should remain as if cast in bronze, incapable of change. Rather I have argued they should be seen as what they are - or, rather, what they were intended to be - part, and only part, of the Constitutional description of our nation.

We cannot approach change to our Constitution casually or lightly. The issues go far too deep for that. However the Constitution was never intended to be an obstacle to mutual understanding on this island and our people would never wish it to be so. If in a new situation there is need - as I expect there will be - of a changed approach to reflect and buttress a new level of mutual understanding, I believe our people will readily be persuaded to endorse change, provided they are satisfied that it does truly serve that purpose.

The gravity of the situation calls out for all of us to rise above the tactics of the moment and to examine together how we can master the problem once and for all.

It is no longer a question of whether we "could" or "would" put an agreed package to the people in a referendum. We are pledged in our Governmental programme to do so. But we clearly need to get around the table to work out how a generally acceptable package might fairly accommodate the deep divisions, including the divisions on constitutional issues, which are the source of the conflict.

We have all learned the hard way in Ireland that the territorial approach has served our relationships poorly. We know from experience that the politics of domination and denial, and the concepts of victory and defeat will never form a basis for understanding and peace between us.

These goals can be achieved only through the quality of the relationships between people on this island. That is the agenda we must pursue, based on the equal legitimacy of the two allegiances and the right of those who profess them to equal respect.

In pursuit of that agenda it is not only possible, but even likely, that we will wish to explore other ways of defining our nation, for example in terms of the people and communities which are its true essence.

We are committed in the Agreement to the proposition that there would be no change in the status of Northern Ireland without the consent of a majority there. We will be quite ready to confirm and elaborate that principle in various ways as unionists might wish, in any new Agreement that transcends the Anglo-Irish Agreement. They should not ask us to do this, however, on the basis that it is the only reality. We must address also the implications of that principle for the position of the nationalist community in Northern Ireland. We cannot hope for agreement by taking account of the concerns of one side only. Constitutional issues cannot be dealt with as mere abstractions divorced from the practical and political realities which underlie the Northern Ireland problem and which no constitutional amendment, of itself, can conjure away.

The programme for a Partnership Government sets out in some detail the objectives which the Government will seek to attain in a renewed process of dialogue. We are committed to pursuing them in a spirit of openness and honesty, showing a willingness to discuss all constitutional issues and to initiate and incorporate change in the context of an overall settlement.

We are working towards an accommodation between the two traditions in Ireland, based on the principle that both must have

equally satisfactory, secure and durable political, administrative and symbolic expression and protection.

I speak as the representative of a new generation in Irish politics. I believe we can cherish what is best in our own heritage and traditions while fully respecting the traditions of others. I will never accept that Irish nationalism should define itself by negation or should take any tradition in this island for an enemy.

My political orientation is towards the future. I want to see an accommodation on the constitutional issue which is reasonable and fair to all. I want to see the principle of equal respect for both traditions developed in all its consequences. I believe both communities in Northern Ireland will ultimately share an interest in this principle which offers important guarantees to both, unionist no less than nationalist.

An accommodation on the constitutional issue which allayed the deepest fears of both communities would open the way for decisions on new structures, which could be designed to match our complicated inter-relationships, and therefore acceptable to all.

There are decisions to be made on how any internal arrangements in Northern Ireland could meet the needs and win the support of both communities there. I believe the potential for agreement exists here. It is all too easy to overlook the amount of practical cooperation that already takes place, even across the deepest political chasms.

We have also decisions to make on North-South institutions. No one has ever maintained that our political division reflects any neat economic or geographical logic. There is a manifest need for structures which will cater for enhanced cooperation in the new world in which we find ourselves. This is particularly true

of the impact of European developments, but there are many other areas where the want has been felt.

For example, there is a demonstrable need for a body which can integrate the separate agendas on both sides and take as its brief the collective needs and the economic logic of the island as a whole.

I believe however our vision of North-South links could go beyond the economic factor, crucial though that is. Our problem stems essentially from the opposing fears that the members of one or other tradition will be the ultimate minority, and therefore, it is assumed, the ultimate losers in an immemorial historical conflict.

The possibility of a united Ireland is at present a horizon of fear for the unionist community, a possibility, as they see it, of almost unlimited menace to them.

We must recognise that there can be no lasting peace and stability in Ireland unless and until the two main traditions on the island cooperate to create and sustain these conditions. That can never be achieved in a climate of mutual suspicion. All strands of nationalism agree that the unionist community must be seen as partners. What is at issue is how that relationship can be offered on terms the unionists can accept.

Is it not open to us to use North-South structures to lay many fears to rest? We could, as of now, agree together basic rules and special provisions to uphold the rights, protect the ethos and guarantee the effective participation in power of any community in Ireland which finds itself in a minority position, whether in the present context of Northern Ireland or in any future all-Ireland context.

The elected leaders of the unionist and nationalist traditions could make a new Agreement, a Covenant, as it were, for our own time, this time representing all Irish people, and guaranteeing that, whatever the circumstances, there will always be full respect and fair dealing between us on this island.

We could agree certain fundamental principles to govern all future relationships and entrench them beyond the reach of all changes in regard to sovereignty. Can we not devise institutions between ourselves to translate such pledges into action and oversee their implementation, so that the possibility of change is freed as far as possible from the many extraneous fears at present associated with it?

There are possibilities here which far transcend the issue of Articles 2 and 3, and which, if we were to work them through in open dialogue, would render certain that the people of this jurisdiction would accept the changes to our Constitution which would arise as one of the necessary ingredients in a new agreement between us.

If, as I suspect, the debate so far on the constitutional aspects has been somewhat at cross-purposes - and that is very understandable in the early stages of such a historic negotiation - then let us set that right. Let us resume our dialogue.

I would ask Northern parties, and particularly the unionists parties, to meet again with the Irish Government. The Ulster Unionist leadership, by coming to Dublin, has already shown by courageous example that they put the need for dialogue above petty manoeuvring. In seeking to renew dialogue the Government will act in the same spirit.

Unless we mobilise all our political forces on this island the paramilitaries will continue playing their murderous games and gambling ever more reckless stakes of innocent human lives. On

both sides they are in the grip of the same insane logic. The definition of supposedly legitimate victims widens progressively to cover ever larger categories of the other community, and points to an ever more nakedly sectarian doctrine of the war of one community on the other.

Each act of violence is the ultimate expression of contempt for the rights of the other community. Even if those responsible reject the overwhelming moral arguments against these atrocities they must surely open their eyes to the true effects of their actions. It is difficult to believe that anyone could deliberately sow such harvests of hatred to poison the environment of their own children and grandchildren. They must surely recognise that their contempt for the will of the people as expressed through the political process carries with it its own nemesis. A secure future for all of us on this island can come only from political dialogue. Any other approach leads only to a murderous cul de sac. That is why it is so important for democratic politics to take the lead. The present generation can write its own history, and it can do so on a new page.

We stand a few years away from a new millennium. We may cross that threshold still crushed under the baggage of our history. We could however set it now as our goal to cross it under a new dispensation, and to ensure that conflict in Ireland does not carry forward into yet another century.

We could achieve permanent agreement on how our relationships will be ordered, through reciprocal guarantees between our two traditions which will transcend and ultimately disarm all disputes about sovereignty.

The unionist community could feel secure on this island. The nationalist aspiration could appear to them in its true essence, as a tribute to the potential contribution their tradition can

make to all of Ireland and a guarantee of a full role in that respect if or when they freely choose to exercise it.

All sectors of opinion in Ireland without exception could see in Britain a friend, and a welcome partner in fostering the bonds of solidarity.

We could enter a new millennium having removed the gun from politics, and therefore without a gun on any street.

The tragedy of young lives wasted in jail could end. The Maze could once again mean only a race-course, or be a receding memory of problems overcome.

Instead of Northern Ireland being a footnote in an ever more crowded and dismal catalogue of ethnic conflict, it could be a shining example of how such conflict may be resolved.

"Millennial" is the adjective historians use to describe the usually foolish hopes attached to such dates. Perhaps these hopes are foolish. However we should not confuse that with impossible. They are possible, if only we can collectively muster the courage to go the last extra mile to achieve them. All we have between us and this goal are our inherited fears and suspicions.

We must at some time reach the point where all of us around a table can say to each other: "This is very difficult for us, but it is a just and fair compromise. Let us do it if it brings us peace at last".

That is our vision and our programme. Can any political leaders in Ireland say they will not put a hand to this work?

My door is open.
