



An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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Statements-on-Opsahl_Report_in_Seanaid

A ninety-minute debate on the Opsahl Report, which took the form of a series of statements, took place in the Seanad yesterday afternoon. It had been arranged on the initiative of Senator Gordon Wilson, who, however, was unable to be present yesterday. It will be resumed in the autumn on a date and in a form yet to be decided.

The opening statement was made by the Tanaiste (copy attached).

The following are the principal points of interest which arose in the subsequent contributions.

Senator-Maurice-Manning (FG) thanked the Tanaiste for his participation in the proceedings.

The most striking element of the Tanaiste's statement had been his renewed call for dialogue among the Northern parties. While Manning had not read the Tanaiste's Guardian interview as an attack on the Unionists, the latter had unfortunately seen it as such and as an abandonment of previous understandings about talks. He was glad that the Tanaiste had "toned down" any such impression and had committed the Government to a renewal of dialogue with all political groups in Northern Ireland. The Tanaiste had also made clear that there could come a point where the Governments would decide to follow their own initiative. Manning has glad that he had taken this opportunity to clarify misconceptions arising from the Guardian interview, which had featured strongly in speeches at the previous day's Twelfth celebrations.

Manning compared the significance of the Opsahl Report with that of the New Ireland Forum. It contained many useful ideas, a number of which the Tanaiste had identified. He asked that, where possible, these ideas should be acted upon now. He thought that the report would have a very significant effect on the thinking of politicians on both sides - though in the medium term rather than in the immediate future.

There was regrettably very little evidence to indicate that it had had an impact in terms of moderating the speeches made on the Twelfth. The only reported exception to the otherwise universal triumphalism and intransigence had been a speech and related radio interview by Jim Molyneaux. Molyneaux had looked pragmatically to the future and had talked of trying to get talks back on the road. It would be encouraging to believe that the UUP leader had meant what he said and had generous proposals to make. On past performance, however, there were few grounds for optimism in this regard.

Picking up on Nuala O' Faolain's article in last Saturday's Irish Times, Manning highlighted in sharply critical terms the abdication of political responsibility and involvement on the part of Northern Ireland's affluent middle class. He also echoed a recent warning by the historian A. T. Q. Stewart about the threat posed by Loyalist paramilitaries.

As regards the Opsahl recommendation on contact with Sinn Fein, Manning said that it was certain that the forces represented by Sinn Fein would have to be part of any final settlement. He would encourage any "third party group" who were capable of engaging in dialogue with Sinn Fein to do so. However, he did not believe that constitutional political parties could engage in dialogue with Sinn Fein for as long as the latter continued their ambiguous relationship with the Provisional IRA and did not condemn the IRA's campaign of

murder. If Sinn Fein wished to get into the political process, they should begin by persuading the IRA to lay down their arms.

Manning urged his colleagues in the Oireachtas to avail of every opportunity during the summer recess to travel North to talk to contacts in the parties there and to encourage them into talks.

In conclusion, he proposed that the British-Irish Interparliamentary Body might establish Select Committees in the Oireachtas and at Westminster to look into the Dublin/Monaghan bombings of 1974 and to prepare joint reports.

Senator Paddy McGowan (FF) spoke very positively of the Report. He welcomed the Tanaiste's statement about it. He also welcomed the Tanaiste's Mansion House speech and his recent Cork speech (30 June), commenting that the latter arose from the knowledge that the talks process was going nowhere and that it was necessary to demonstrate the willingness of the two Governments to seek new approaches. He also endorsed the President's recent visit to West Belfast. He objected to the Unionist attempts to attach preconditions to talks and observed that changes to Articles 2 and 3 were in any event not in the Government's gift.

Most of Senator McGowan's speech focussed on the need for an acceptable system of justice in Northern Ireland, without which there could be no political progress. He wondered how nationalists could have confidence in the administration of justice there if High Court judges took part in Twelfth parades. He also hinted at involvement by the NI security forces in the recent murder of a breadman in Co. Tyrone.

Senator Mary Henry (Independent) highlighted the section of the Report dealing with women's affairs and regretted that so few women were involved in the political process in Northern Ireland. She agreed with Senator Manning that it had clearly not been the Tanaiste's intention in his Guardian interview to antagonize Unionists. Noting the analogous furore created by mistaken press reports some years ago to the effect that Dick Spring was contemplating putting himself forward for the Presidency, she observed that the Tanaiste was simply saying that, if there was no political movement, the two Governments would have to take some action.

Senator David Norris (Independent) suggested that some "areas of common government" might be created between North and South on a federal basis (e.g., agriculture, tourism, justice and energy) and that in exchange the island of Ireland might rejoin the Commonwealth. He saluted John Hume's courage in meeting Gerry Adams (though he considered the joint communique unwise). He strongly supported the President's visit to West Belfast. He repeated a suggestion made some months ago for language which might supplement Articles 2 and 3: "In any attempt to realize this aspiration, the use of violence will be prohibited".

Finally, Senator Ann Gallagher (Labour) welcomed the Report as an enlightening experience, highlighted the problems caused in Northern Ireland by the lack of political accountability and hoped that it would stimulate new thinking on the future of Northern Ireland.



David Donoghue

14 July 1993

Statement by Tánaiste

Seanad Éireann - 13 July 1993

A Chathaoirligh,

I very much welcome the decision by this House to hold a debate today on the Opsahl Report on Northern Ireland.

This debate adds to the opportunities for dialogue on the subject of Northern Ireland which have been arranged both in this House and in Dail Éireann in recent months.

I congratulate the Seanad for providing this occasion to assess the significance of the work undertaken by Professor Torkel Opsahl and his six colleagues: Padraig O' Malley, Eamonn Gallagher, Professor Marianne Elliott, Lady Faulkner, Professor Ruth Lister and Rev. Dr. Eric Gallagher.

The Opsahl Commission was established in May of last year by the independent citizens' group, Initiative '92, to inquire into possible ways forward for Northern Ireland. Its mandate was to provide the people of Northern Ireland and beyond with an opportunity to discuss and consider possible ways forward and to express their ideas, hopes and fears.

In this goal, the expectations of the Commission have been amply vindicated. Altogether, 554 submissions were received representing the work of around 3,000 people. Six weeks of oral hearings were held by the Commission throughout Northern Ireland and nearly two hundred presentations were made.

In his introduction to the Report, Professor Opsahl draws one central conclusion from this process, which is that "the people of Northern Ireland do want dialogue, at every level". This theme is echoed, indeed, in virtually all the submissions made to the Commission.

Indeed the report shows more than just that the people want dialogue. One of its great merits is to illustrate how, beneath the apparently frozen lines of political division, there is a serious and mature process of reflexion on the problem taking place in Northern Ireland. People are not only willing to think of ways out of the present impasse. They also took the trouble to formulate and communicate these views and showed, for the most part, a willingness to listen to the views of others. The submissions are in general thoughtful, positive and constructive. This report refutes any notion that Northern Ireland is somehow a society bereft of political ideas. It is rather a society which has so far failed to find a generally acceptable framework to mobilise these ideas and to harness the goodwill and the willingness to accommodate others which inspired them. I believe that failure poses a

challenge to political leaders in Northern Ireland, no less than to the two Governments, to develop an adequate response.

For my own part, I welcome the stress the report lays on dialogue as an indispensable tool in the search for political consensus. Nowhere is it of greater relevance and urgency, furthermore, than in the search for solutions to the problems of a divided society like Northern Ireland.

The Programme for a Partnership Government places beyond all doubt the commitment of this Government to the pursuit of a lasting accommodation of the Northern Ireland problem founded on dialogue. We made clear that a major priority for us is "to recommence and sustain the process of dialogue with the parties in Northern Ireland and with the British Government, building on progress already made". We indicated prominently our intention to seek "an urgent resumption of political dialogue to address comprehensively all of the relationships involved in an open and innovative spirit, ready to discuss every issue and to incorporate all agreed changes".

We are not just ready ourselves "to discuss every issue". We believe that such willingness on all sides is a precondition for a successful outcome to talks.

That was indeed the commitment entered into by all the participants in the talks process, when we agreed in the statement of 26 March 1991 that, "in order to ensure a full

airing of the issues, it will be open to each of the parties to raise any aspect of these relationships including constitutional issues, or any other matter which it considers relevant". I believe that open-ended approach should be maintained.

All of us in the talks process have recognized that our purpose is an ambitious one. Our declared objective is to achieve "a new beginning for relationships within Northern Ireland, within the island of Ireland and between the peoples of these islands".

To be faithful to the 26 March terms, we must be willing to explore every issue. We must be willing to go beyond the known and the familiar and to embrace new horizons in the search for agreement. We must be willing to follow whatever fresh paths our dialogue may open up to us. If there is one conclusion which stands out clearly from any consideration of the problem, including this Report, it is that past approaches have failed. New ideas and new approaches are needed on all sides.

Some apt lines from the poet Michael Longley serve as a foreword to the Opsahl Report. Longley speaks of the "space" offered by this initiative

"for me
And you to stay alive
By sharing thought and word".

He goes on to ask "Are you within hearing? Am I being heard?".

It is, I believe, essential that we should all be able to create space for dialogue. We must give ourselves complete freedom in our search for ways in which we can reach better understanding and communication with each other. The more we restrict the space for dialogue by setting tactical or defensive limits or preconditions to it, the less likely it is that we can usher in the new thinking and new approaches which are so patently needed to come to grips with this problem.

The Opsahl Commission has contributed admirably to the creation of such space. It has brought together a wealth of ideas and insights across the entire spectrum of political thought relating to Northern Ireland. It will, I am sure, stimulate considerable reflection over the months and years ahead both on the nature of the problem and on the solutions which may be called for. It will enrich the public debate and will make its own special contribution to the task of deepening understanding between the two traditions in Ireland.

The Opsahl Report bears powerful and moving testimony to the countless individuals and organisations in Northern Ireland

who have steadfastly refused to succumb to fatalism and despair. However diverse the remedies proposed, their contributions to the Commission reflect in most instances a degree of honesty, commitment and tolerance for the viewpoint of others which is deeply reassuring and offers hope that a lasting and just accommodation is achievable.

The late Professor F. S. L. Lyons posed a harsh question in a 1978 lecture that retains its validity today: "...have we in our entanglement with history locked ourselves into a hall of distorting mirrors so grotesque that we can no longer distinguish the realities of what has happened in this island from the myths we have chosen to weave about certain symbolic events?"

True political leadership involves distinguishing reality from myth and offering a vision which suits the complex circumstances of the present rather than the comfortable simplicities of the past. A true coming together of both traditions in Ireland must involve transcending the legacy of history and re-defining our relationships with each other and the relationship between these two islands.

The work done by the Opsahl Commission is a very helpful and constructive contribution to this process. It is a merit of the Report that it stands back from dogmatic assertion and boldly questions many inherited attitudes and positions. It also presents a wide range of options on possible ways

forward. It is a welcome and wide-ranging stimulus to political debate on the realities to be addressed as part of the search for a lasting accommodation between the nationalist and unionist identities. It has performed a timely and valuable service in reassessing traditional positions and in exploring common ground between the two traditions. The Report is, I believe, of great service in underlining, firstly, that the approach to a solution must be one of compromise between sincere, deeply held and legitimate positions, and, secondly, that such a compromise must be radical and innovative.

One of the most striking and resonant themes to emerge from the submissions to the Commission is the overwhelming desire for peace. It is abundantly clear that people in both parts of Ireland and in Britain wish to see progress made as rapidly as possible towards a resolution of the conflict and the ending of violence and suffering. An opinion poll which was commissioned in order to test the findings of the Report found that the resumption of political dialogue is favoured not only by a substantial majority of those questioned in Northern Ireland but also by a clear majority of public opinion in the South and in Britain.

I believe that it is the democratic duty of the two Governments and the Northern Ireland parties to respond to this unequivocal statement of public preference by resuming political dialogue without delay. It is difficult to conceive

of a task more compelling for democratically elected public representatives in Northern Ireland than¹ to participate in discussions aimed at ensuring a future of lasting peace and stability for those whom they represent.

The expectations of public opinion in this part of Ireland, and in Northern Ireland, and in Britain, are crystal clear. Surveys have established a great public receptivity to the broad lines of the report. Our peoples wish above all to see a political agreement. They find it difficult to understand those who obstruct the pursuit of agreement and frustrate their clearly expressed wishes.

Both as Governments and as political leaders, our role is to serve the people. We are at all times accountable to our respective electorates. Our efforts to achieve a political agreement are undertaken on their behalf and, as the agreed terms of 26 March make clear, the fruit of our labours must finally meet the test of their approval.

This critical dimension to our work must not be overlooked. The people are not remote from, or disinterested in, our efforts. They wish us to return to the table immediately and to negotiate an agreement upon which they will be given an opportunity to pronounce at the appropriate time.

The wealth of insights and advice contributed to the Opsahl Commission by ordinary people in both parts of Ireland

testifies to a profound public desire to see progress made at the earliest possible moment on this most intractable of problems.

In reaching its conclusions and recommendations, therefore, the Commission rightly emphasized the importance of consultation with the people, and of persisting in the search for a new and deep accommodation which all could ultimately support, irrespective of the barriers in the path to agreement.

A continuing failure to resolve the fundamental conflict between the two traditions in Ireland will steadily undermine the appeal of constitutional politics and promote increased recourse to paramilitary violence. It is in all our interests that we should devise urgently new political arrangements which will give expression to the identity and validity of both traditions. No lasting stability will be achievable unless structures can be found which ensure complete equality of treatment between nationalism and unionism.

This is one of the cardinal principles which the Opsahl Report has highlighted. The Report has identified the need for "parity of esteem" between the two traditions. It has also proposed that a Government of Northern Ireland "should be put in place based on the principle that each community has an equal voice in making and executing the laws or a veto on

their execution and an equal share in administrative authority".

This suggestion develops to a logical conclusion a fact of life which is becoming increasingly apparent in Northern Ireland: Neither community has the capacity to dictate terms to the other. The path to progress lies in cooperation between them, on a basis honourable to both. If fear of discrimination is one of the roots of mistrust between the two sides, are there not good arguments for a system such as this, where each community surrenders, as it were, every power or possibility of discrimination or unfair dealing into the custody of the other community?

I am also attracted to the proposal to give legal approval to the concept of "parity of esteem".

There are many other proposals and suggestions in the Report which I found helpful and illuminating. The recommendation in favour of a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland is persuasive. The wide range of recommendations made in relation to discrimination and the combatting of deprivation also match Irish Government concerns.

I also welcome the emphasis laid on the creation of a cross border economic institution to develop the full range of economic cooperation between North and South. Another crucial point emphasised in the Report is the importance of the

European Community dimension to the development of common ground between North and South.

I am also happy to respond to the fears expressed in the Report about the continued existence of the Adelaide Hospital. In the period since the Commission formulated its recommendations, the Government have announced measures which have I believe resolved this potential problem to general satisfaction.

The importance of the Commission's various conclusions and recommendations lie in their role in encouraging a wide-ranging public debate, which, I have no doubt, will be of significance in the context of a resumption of political dialogue.

The Report has also furnished a comprehensive analysis of views in all sections of the community. Much of this strikes a sympathetic chord in this part of the island.

What all of us must move towards, and what lies at the heart of the Opsahl Report, is an abandonment of the concepts of victory and defeat in relation to a solution of the Northern Ireland problem. These categories have no place in any rational approach to the problem. The only victory must be a common one; the only gain a shared one. Domination by one community over the other, in whatever context, is always fated

to fail because it is a permanent source of instability and injustice.

We now have a compelling need for new thinking in which recognition of the validity of one tradition is not seen as a threat by the other, or affirmation of the rights of one not seen as denial of those of the other.

It is in that spirit that this Government has diligently pursued the process of political dialogue. That continues to be our objective and I would hope that the two unionist parties will find it possible to join us at the table in a common search for a solution.

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If, despite all our efforts, we do not succeed in our shared endeavour to achieve a resumption of dialogue, it will inevitably be necessary for both Governments to take stock of the situation and to decide on further options. The issues are too important for the Governments to succumb to immobility or ritual gestures, or to allow themselves to become bereft of policy options in the face of persistent refusal to engage in dialogue. If one avenue to progress closes down, others must surely be looked at.

One alternative, which I have already signalled, would be for the two Governments to consider how they could make best use of their joint resources in the search for a settlement. We could together identify the key elements which would need to

be part of any new accommodation and could present proposals to the other participants on what we considered to be the right way forward.

The Taoiseach and I remain utterly determined in our conviction that the only way forward in relation to Northern Ireland lies in the pursuit of a comprehensive political accommodation which is built on the rights of both traditions in Ireland. I repeat the hope that all political parties in Northern Ireland will delay no further in joining both Governments in the discussion and negotiation of such an accommodation.

The gravity of the situation in Northern Ireland has been given fresh emphasis in the Opsahl Report. For too long, the people of Northern Ireland have endured hardship, division, political stalemate and unacceptable violence. The Opsahl Commission has provided a voice for their concerns and that voice, insistent and compelling, demands an end to the present unacceptable situation and a commitment to seek new ways forward.

It is for the two Governments and the political parties to heed this message, to reflect on the different views and ideas put forward both by the Commission as well as the individual contributors and to move forward imaginatively to meet the overwhelming desire for lasting peace and stability. In this,

I pledge the unremitting dedication and commitment of the Irish Government.

I warmly congratulate the Opsahl Commission, all those who made submissions to it and all those who assisted it in an undertaking of singular value and importance. It has been an extraordinary experiment in public participation and has provided a unique forum for public debate about, as Professor Opsahl puts it, the corner of our common Europe that is Northern Ireland. It has been a vehicle through which many authentic, and often perceptive and moving, voices make themselves heard. When the achievement of new structures in Northern Ireland, within Ireland and between both islands is at last realised, I believe the work of the Opsahl Commission will be seen to have made its own contribution to this process.