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Article by Tánaiste for Belfast Telegraph 7 September 1994

Yesterday's statement by the IRA leadership, in which they announced their decision to end their twenty-five year campaign, is a development of profound significance which should be seen as an opportunity, not a threat, by Unionists as well as Nationalists. The decision is a welcome acknowledgement of the hunger and yearning of Irish people, North and South, for an end to all violence. It also crucially enhances the prospects for sustained political progress. Success in the political process, I believe, consists in the achievement of a durable peace, and its corollary, a just and lasting political settlement. The aim of the Irish Government is an agreed Ireland, where the principle of self-determination is balanced by the requirement of consent. It must be based on freedom from coercion and full recognition of the diversity of the people on this island. These principles, and the agenda for constructive change which they entail and indeed demand, lie at the heart of the Joint Declaration, which has an enduring and central validity for the Irish Government.

I know that many in the Unionist community view the IRA decision with suspicion, and even apprehension. Despite all the clear evidence to the contrary, the spectre is still raised in some quarters of a Dublin Government, with a hidden agenda of achieving political objectives by stealth, as if we could successfully smuggle the entire Unionist community into a united Ireland for example, against their will or unbeknownst to themselves.

Let me make this absolutely clear: we have no intention of coercing, tricking or deceiving Unionists. I have always been straight and honest in my dealings with the Unionist community and I know the value which the people in this part of Ireland place on straight and frank talking. I would like to offer some reflections in that spirit:

First, the IRA's statement marks a significant and potentially decisive step forward in the search for lasting peace in Ireland. I am confident that all people of good-will will now look for a prompt end to the violent campaign waged by other paramilitary groups. The leadership of Sinn Fein and the IRA took a major, and in their terms, very courageous step. It is my profound hope that the Loyalist paramilitaries can now take a similar step.

Second, I want to address the speculation that there is some hidden dimension to this welcome news. There have been no secret deals with the IRA. That is not the way the Government of which I am a member does its business. The approach of the Irish Government to the elaboration of a lasting settlement in Ireland was fully set out in the Joint Declaration. There is no codicil, no hidden protocol. Our approach is governed by the principles which we espoused in the Joint Declaration and by two bedrock principles that I believe are of core importance to the Irish Government in this process: first, that violence must not be legitimised and that there must be full respect for the democratic principle that power comes only from the ballot box; and secondly, that the principle of consent is crucial in all contexts, including of course in relation to the question of a change in the status of Northern Ireland.

Third, the question has been put - if there have been no secret undertakings to Sinn Fein/IRA, then what happened to bring about the ending by the IRA of their campaign? Obviously, that is a question for the IRA to answer. Persons of goodwill, John Hume and many others have made great efforts to bring about an end to paramilitary violence. We should be grateful for those efforts. I would also recall what I said categorically at the time of the Joint Declaration - that the Declaration among other things removed any shred of justification for the use of political violence in Ireland.

The Declaration offered the people of Ireland, of both traditions, the opportunity to search for agreement on a basis that is dignified and honourable for both. It is abundantly clear that this new departure and the challenges inherent in the Declaration were the subject of intensive, prolonged and indeed painful debate within the Republican Movement. We should be grateful now that the long process of reflection has ended with the decision we have all yearned for.

Fourth. both communities in Northern Ireland have suffered grievously from the violence of the last 25 years. Human life is priceless and the human cost of the conflict has been, literally, incalculable. The legacy of suspicion and mistrust is correspondingly a weighty one. I am aware of the suspicions and concerns of the Unionist community in a situation where Northern Ireland is changing in new and sometimes uncomfortable ways and in a manner in which the old certainties are being overtaken. I acknowledge and appreciate the efforts of those in the Unionist community and the Protestant churches who are urging a calm and reasoned approach at this time of new opportunities. I recognise that the construction of trust and reconciliation will be a slow process. We must not delay in starting this work of healing the wounds of both communities and ensuring the political progress that will remove for ever the possibility of such wounds occurring again.

The prize - the creation of new and lasting arrangements to govern how Nationalist and Unionist can live together with pride in their respective traditions and mutual toleration of and respect for those same traditions - is great. To all of the constitutional and democratically mandated politicians on this island, I say that our people will not forgive us if we allow that prize to slip from our grasp or to wither on the vine.

The urgent challenge now is to discard as relics of history

the politics of domination and denial, and the categories of victory and defeat. Instead, we must substitute in their place new frameworks for dialogue and new structures to govern our relationships, that address our dissensions but that will fully respect our differences, and guarantee justice and parity of esteem for both the Unionist and Nationalist traditions.

The Government hope that it will now soon be possible to close forever this long and violent chapter in our history and that it will never be repeated. We must put the past behind us. The main task ahead is to build a new trust and foster a spirit of reconciliation between all the people on this island.

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