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Speech by the Taoiseach Mr. Albert Reynolds, T.D.,
at a session on 'Northern Ireland - Working for Peace',
Ogra Fianna Fáil Annual Conference, Grand Hotel, Malahide,
Saturday, 16 April 1994 at 4.15 p.m.

Achieving peace in Northern Ireland, that will be just and lasting, is our most pressing political objective. I am delighted that Ogra Fianna Fáil has devoted a substantial time to debating this topic. I am gratified by the strong support for the peace process that exists throughout the Fianna Fáil organisation and among the public at large.

Fianna Fáil has a key role to play in the current situation. With our democratic Republican political philosophy, we are well placed to understand the ideology that motivates the Republican Movement in the North of Ireland, and what bridges need to be built, to achieve permanent peace. But equally we have to recognize that traditional approaches are manifestly not enough to break the long political stalemate. While recognizing the Nationalist nightmare and upholding the rights of Nationalists, we must continually reach out to the Unionist community, reviving something of the spirit of the United Irishmen, which has been neglected for far too long.

I welcome the presence here of Councillor Michael McGimpsey, who I believe has United Irish ancestry. He and his brother have shown a willingness over the last 10 years to engage in dialogue and debate with Nationalist Ireland, North and South, forthrightly representing Unionist views, whether in the New Ireland Forum, the Supreme Court or in recent political talks and contacts. But I do not intend to embarrass Michael with the type

of praise that might cost him votes!

Fianna Fáil and the Ulster Unionist Party are the two largest parties North and South. There is a responsibility on us both to free our people from the present violent situation, and to join in developing a better future for us all in the land we love.

The case taken by Michael and Chris McGimpsey about the constitutionality of the Anglo-Irish Agreement served an important public function, in clarifying the relationship of Article 1 of the Anglo-Irish Agreement with its consent clause to Articles 2 and 3 of the Constitution. The Supreme Court found that the pursuit of Irish unity required by Articles 2 and 3 was eminently compatible with the absolute requirement of consent and with the spirit of Article 29 on the peaceful resolution of disputes. In other words, while holding to our view that partition 70 years ago was wrong and that Ireland ought to be politically united, as of right, acceptance of the requirement of consent is in keeping with the spirit of the Constitution and with the pure Republican principles contained in it. That represents an important advance in political understanding, which forms part of the basis of the Joint Peace Declaration.

It is now accepted on all sides, including Sinn Féin, that it would be wrong to coerce a majority of the people of Northern Ireland into a united Ireland. That reality was also recognized by most Republican Leaders back in the 1916-21 period, with the proviso, which was not observed, that minority rights in the North be fully respected. If it is wrong to coerce a majority in the North, then what is the point of continued armed struggle? Respected Republican leaders of the past always knew when their own people were hurting, and when it was time to end the armed conflict.

I do not share the facile assumption that unilateral British withdrawal would throw the Unionist people into the arms of the

South. On the contrary, there would be a real danger of communal violence and the type of violent community upheaval or worse which has characterised the political situation at regular intervals in the past. That is a scenario which must never be allowed to happen again. The future we want is one built on mutual consent and agreement.

The essence of the Peace Declaration is the removal of coercion on all sides and the establishment of a balanced framework for future democratic progress. Peace will remove the coercion of the Nationalist population by some of the security forces and by the Loyalist paramilitaries. With certainty as to how the constitutional ground rules will operate, there will be no basis for the threat of physical force, which, for example, brought down Sunningdale and which tried to bring down the Anglo-Irish Agreement, and which is a real impediment to political progress. No party has a political veto.

Equally, the threat of coercion vis-a-vis the Unionist community will also be removed, and they can feel freed from any perceived siege by Nationalists. Whilst accepting that there were serious flaws in the way that Northern Ireland was founded, there can be no question at this stage of using a majority in the island as a whole to override the constitutional wishes of the people of Northern Ireland. Physical violence, which has ruined the lives of many people in the North and impeded both reconciliation and economic progress, must cease. If I can help to bring lasting peace to Northern Ireland, I will bear with fortitude political criticisms of my role, in the knowledge that I will have done a service to all the people of the North, Unionist and Nationalist alike.

The peace process requires immense patience. As W.B. Yeats said, 'Peace comes dripping slow'. Nevertheless, I believe we have made considerable progress, that the situation has been significantly altered, and that in due course peace will be achieved. It was never going to be easy after 25 years of

violence. The fears, suspicions and distrust on all sides are intense. We know from peace processes in other parts of the world that progress is difficult, and that there can be many setbacks along the way. But I will not be diverted or deflected by anyone from my pursuit of peace now, in accord with the clear wishes of the vast majority of the people throughout this island. I am not and never have been engaged in the appeasement of those who resort to violence. But I will continue to use all my powers of persuasion to convince them that there is another and a better way, recognising that those engaged in violence for 25 years must be weaned away from it by constructive debate, by showing that the pursuit of legitimate political objectives can no longer justify the taking of even one more innocent life. The Declaration provides an alternative democratic framework for political progress, removing the last vestige of justification for violence.

Further political progress will be much easier in conditions of peace. Then all parties would be at the negotiating table, and what they would be negotiating would be a peace settlement in the fullest sense of the word. That stage is long overdue.

Realistically, a united Ireland by agreement is a long-term goal. When we put on the table the Government of Ireland Act 1920 alongside Articles 2 and 3, we must at the very least insist on the restoration of the political balance and the safeguards for the Nationalist community that were present, on paper, in that Act. The principle of Irish self-determination implicit in the first Anglo-Irish settlement of 1920-1 is now explicitly recognised by the British Government in the Joint Declaration. They have pledged to act as persuaders for an agreement between the people of Ireland North and South, whatever that involves, and everyone has to recognise their seriousness in making such a commitment.

We will insist in any negotiations on two broad principles:
there must be North-South structures and executive

institutions that reflect both the practical needs arising from European integration and the recognition of the sense of identity of a substantial section of the Northern population. As long as the North retains constitutional links with Britain, there must be corresponding institutional links between North and South as provided for at the time of partition;

Secondly, the principles of equality and parity of esteem between the two communities in the North must be translated into reality across the board, as far as practicable.

Both of these demands from Nationalists are from any point of view reasonable ones, without prejudice to the possibility of subsequent constitutional change by agreement and consent.

The peace dividend will bring increased economic benefits North and South, in terms of increased investment, tourism and trade. Resources will be switched by both Governments out of security and into the market sector. I attach a high priority to realizing the great potential of North-South economic cooperation, which would be initially the main focus of North-South institutions, and which could bring as many as 75,000 additional jobs.

It is often claimed that Irish unity would be economically unviable. I disagree. Living standards and productivity North and South are converging rapidly, and in the long-term a united Ireland should be more viable and dynamic than two smaller economies. The present British subsidy, which British taxpayers will not pay for in perpetuity, is distorted by the security situation, and by Northern Ireland's very high dependence on public sector employment. Indeed, the Irish security contribution is three to four times more per capita than in the U.K. Over a long transitional period, a continued British subvention would be needed to prevent a drop in living standards. The European Union would also assist in consolidating peace. I

am confident that the United States in particular would be prepared to play a generous and constructive role in underpinning a radical political settlement. Building on the goodwill for Ireland that exists from President Clinton down, in the Administration and in Congress, the leaders of the Irish-American community, some of whom now occupy powerful positions, would do for Ireland, what the Jewish community in the United States have done for Israel, though much less would be needed.

A peaceful situation would no longer require a British army presence on the streets of the North. New policing structures, with more evenly representative policing personnel and developed on a community basis, could transform public confidence in, and attitudes towards, the police.

Earlier this week, when I launched a book on the history of the Irish Cooperative Movement founded by Horace Plunkett, I was reminded of the role played by the tradition of constructive Unionism. Constructive Unionism at the turn of the century also played a part in the amicable ending of landlordism, the development of the first regional policy directed towards the West of Ireland, and the revival of the interest in our Celtic heritage including the Irish language.

The qualified support of the Ulster Unionist party last December for the Downing Street Declaration was in the best tradition of constructive Unionism. I admired Jim Molyneux for saying that as leader of his party he did not want to be responsible for delaying peace by as much as a single day. History will vindicate his stand then.

It is not easy for either community to be constructive, when their own community has been under physical attack and intimidation for 25 years. I do not of course ignore the mistakes and grave misdemeanours of the past, nor the negative responsibility borne in greater or lesser degree on all sides for the continuation of the troubles for so long.

My hope is that we will soon be able to write a new chapter in the history of our country, that the gun will be taken out of Irish politics forever, and that everyone will adopt a constructive approach in a new atmosphere to the consolidation of peace.

We too in Fianna Fáil will have a leading responsibility in the situation that follows. We will have to be creative and imaginative, and not just clinging to old certainties.

I want to make it clear that as part of our approach we are prepared to provide far-reaching guarantees of the rights and identities of the Unionist community as well as the Nationalist community, including protection of the continuing right to dual citizenship, whether in the present context, or so that they can participate fully as of right and with confidence from the start in any new and agreed Ireland. As things stand, no-one from Northern Ireland standing as a Unionist or Nationalist has any real prospect of participating in a British Government, yet both could play an important part in governing the whole of Ireland. The best long-term protection of their position would be to take an active part in shaping the whole environment in which they live on this island.

I personally would be prepared to provide a guaranteed 30% of places in an enlarged government, and throughout the public sector, for as long as was necessary, to members of the two communities in the North in proportion to their respective population, in accordance with systems that have been developed on parts of the European Continent. Partnership Government would acquire a whole new meaning! There could also be, if desired, as part of that framework a regional responsibility-sharing Government. Even under a more limited settlement, that might be envisaged now, a regional administration could be one important element alongside North-South institutions in replacing violence by providing a return to real politics in the North.

The equation of advantage is altering. Given satisfactory financial underpinning, an all-Ireland economy could bring greater prosperity to people in both parts. Already some of our progressive schemes, especially for the elderly, are more generous. We would both carry more political weight in Brussels than at present, and could help to secure a better deal for Ulster farmers and for infrastructural improvement. Differences in social legislation are disappearing, and indeed in many respects the atmosphere of Irish society is now more liberal and tolerant in the South than it is in the North. For example, women play a much greater role in public life here, the trade unions are respected social partners, and we have more enlightened social legislation, in many areas, such as equality in the tax code, on rape, and births outside of marriage. The contribution of those from the Irish Protestant tradition is universally recognised and honoured, and there has long since been complete social integration in this part of the country.

It is time for all of us North and South to shed the stereotypes of the past, to close the yawning political gulf that has opened up in Irish society since 1885, and to find modern ways of living and working together, even if for some time to come a greater number in the North prefer to stay politically apart. Between the traditional poles of belonging to a sovereign United Kingdom and a sovereign United Ireland there is a large room for compromise and mutual accommodation, and for a step by step approach to building confidence and promoting national reconciliation and co-operation. A future United Ireland will be as different from the model conceived in the 1930s, as the united Germany of today is from the United German Empire of 1871. Such an Ireland will inevitably take shape in the context of a better and closer relationship with Britain, and of partnership in the European Union, with the close friendship and strong economic ties with the United States also playing a key role.

We in Fianna Fáil are a party that will always hold faith with our vision of the Ireland of the future. But we will also

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concentrate in a spirit of pragmatism on the practical possibilities of making immediate progress here and now. In that regard, peace is the first essential step, and the master key that will open all doors to the future.