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Department of the Taoiseach,
Dublin 2.
Tel. (01) 668 9333

THAR CEANN

Roinn an Taoisigh,
Baile Átha Cliath 2.
Tel. (01) 668 9333

Speech by the Taoiseach

Mr. Albert Reynolds, T. D.

at the Inaugural Session of the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation,

Dublin Castle, Friday 28 October 1994 at 11.10 a.m.

Cuirim céad míle fáilte roimh na toscairí go léir agus go háirithe, roimh na

toscairí ó Thuaisceart Éireann. chuig an ócáid fíor-stairiúil seo. Inniu tá

coiscéim ana thábhachtach i dhéanamh againn ar bhóthar na siochána. Is é an

aidhm atá againn, ná saol níos fearr a chruthú, do gach aon duine ar an oileán seo - saol atá bunaithe ar an síochán, agus ar an chomh-oibriú. Buíochas le Dia, go bhfuil deireadh anois le coimhlint armtha. Táimid in ann dul chun cinn a dhéanamh anois ar bhealach na síochána. Guímíd rath Dé ar an obair.

Today's inaugural meeting, within a few weeks of the two ceasefires, represents a further important step on the road to a just and lasting peace. No one should be in any doubt about the value of the Forum, or of the importance of its work.

The establishment of the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation was a key commitment by the Irish Government, set out in the Joint Peace Declaration.

The Forum was always a vital and indispensable part of the peace process from its earliest stages on the Irish side. The Forum represents one of the principal bridges, which enables us to leave 25 years of violence behind and to cross over to a fully inclusive democratic process, which will pave the road to a just and lasting peace.

The steps required to establish such a peace will in all probability pass through more than one stage. Everybody who is here is by that very fact making a contribution to peace and to its consolidation.

Let us remember that the human consequences of peace mean a better quality of life for all, a gradual return to normality, where no one need fear the knock on the door, where people can go out to work, safe in the knowledge that they will return home, where it is safe for young people to go out at night, and where children can play safely outside. There will be no more of the endless funerals, that strike at the heart of a community's sense of security.

The actual task of the Forum is to begin wide-ranging discussions on the many steps needed to achieve peace, stability and reconciliation and to remove the barriers of distrust, based on respect for the equal rights and validity of both traditions and identities. Our aim must be to build or intensify civilised and harmonious relationships, particularly where they do not exist at present, between the two communities in Northern Ireland, between the traditions on this island, and between those who live on it and on the neighbouring island. I am not of course attempting to deny the existence of a middle ground. Indeed, I would hope that all parties here will contribute to the creation of a much larger middle ground.

The challenge to all of us here is to find ways of transcending deep-seated differences on constitutional and political issues, that will allow us all of us on this island to work together constructively in future. In terms of long-term constitutional aims and ideals, the two principal traditions may be far apart at present. But the Joint Declaration provides a framework, whereby those differences can eventually, or indeed at any time, be democratically resolved.

We do not have to be poles apart on what it is useful or sensible to do together, while those differences remain.

Indeed, our aim must be to help remove the destructiveness out of the political conflict and the constitutional divide, which has cost over 3,000 lives over the past 25 years and brought tragedy and grief to every sector of the community.

While people can now breathe a little easier, the still fragile confidence in peace and in our ability to find new ways of handling our differences must be carefully nurtured. Reconciliation will not be easy.

I am very glad that so many political parties and groupings have on this occasion agreed to participate in the work of the Forum. They include all the Southern political parties and independent representation.

We are also glad to welcome from the North, or mainly or partly from the North, the representatives of the SDLP, Sinn Féin, the Alliance Party, Democratic Left, the Workers' Party, the Greens as well as Senator Gordon Wilson in a personal capacity. I regret, though I also understand, that the Unionist parties do not feel able to be present, even though the Forum is not an executive or negotiating body of any kind.

I hope nevertheless that individuals, groups and organisations from the Unionist community broadly defined will participate in the work of the Forum, as they did on the last occasion. This body is not in any way intended for the purpose of constructing a Nationalist front directed against the Unionist community.

Its purpose is to promote free dialogue and discussion on a multilateral basis between constitutional parties North and South, and to allow us to address the many problems that will have to be resolved, if peace and stability are to take firm root in Northern Ireland. From here on, the Forum will have to decide itself how it runs itself and organises its work, and the extent to which for example it does its work in committees.

The New Ireland Forum carried out valuable work ten years ago. It was, unlike this body, an exclusively Nationalist body, which redefined in modern terms an analysis of the problem, and of the dimensions that had to be addressed.

It set out the long-term solutions which in their opinion offered the best prospects for a lasting solution. However, space was undoubtedly made for a transitional settlement or agreement which might fall far short of the ultimate ideal. Many of the principles of the Forum and its analysis have entered into general usage, for example, the insight that 'a settlement which recognises the legitimate rights of nationalists and unionists must transcend the context of Northern Ireland'. Both the language and the insights of the Report of the New Ireland Forum were drawn upon in the negotiation of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, and in the Joint Peace Declaration, although there were many other sources of inspiration as well.

In revisiting the Forum Report, there may be a wish to further refine parts of the analysis. The long-term constitutional models, all of which require agreement and consent for their implementation, should not on this occasion, I believe, be our immediate most pressing preoccupation. While Fianna Fáil will continue to subscribe fully to the Report and conclusions of the New Ireland Forum as an important expression of democratic nationalist consensus on long-term aims, the work ahead in the short to medium term is to establish for the first time in our history some measure of agreement on future structures governing relationships within Northern Ireland, between North and South, and between Ireland and Britain.

It would be my hope, following my meeting at Chequers earlier this week, that we will be able to agree a Joint Framework Document to inform our discussions.

Naturally, that depends on remaining issues being resolved in a satisfactory way. The Irish Government will only subscribe to a Joint Framework Document, if we are satisfied that it can form the basis for negotiating a new and deep accommodation, and that it can provide secure foundations for a just and lasting peace. Any framework that is not even-handed and that leans too heavily towards one community rather than another and that does not adequately reflect legitimate aspirations on either side is doomed to failure. The terms of reference of the Forum make it clear that participation 'will be entirely without prejudice to the position on constitutional issues held by any party'. No party has to subscribe to any particular set of constitutional aims, to contribute to the Forum, which is fully open to those of the Unionist persuasion. No political party has to pass any political test in order to take part.

The only condition is the commitment to resolving differences exclusively by peaceful and democratic means. The Forum cannot and should not as a democratic body seek to preclude the full and free expression and discussion of political point of view.

At the same time, the Government, with the support of all parties in the Dáil, are firmly committed to the principles of the Downing Street Declaration, which is not for renegotiation.

I would now like to outline some of the topics, which could be usefully examined by the Forum:

First, the means of establishing a genuine participatory democracy in Northern Ireland based on parity of esteem and equality of opportunity and of treatment;

Secondly, a close definition of how the principles of parity of esteem and equality of treatment can be translated into practice on the ground, and in a fourthly, how confidence can be built in civilian policing, and the changes that are needed to encourage full cross-community participation in it, as well as what should common sense way,

Thirdly, what is needed to initiate a healing process between the communities in Northern Ireland, and more widely, listening to the views of those that have been worst affected by the violence on both sides:

Fourthly, how confidence can be built in civilian policing, and the changes that are needed to encourage full cross-community participation in it, as well as what should be involved in total demilitarisation and the establishment of a normal society, such as the return to barracks and the disposal of weapons;

Fifthly, the priority tackling of economic disadvantage and social deprivation in inner cities in Northern Ireland and areas on both sides of the border, and putting international financial support to the best possible use;

Sixtly, a comprehensive revision and updating of the main economic reports of the last Forum, and discussion of the areas, where there is most scope for a concerted North-South approach, including those to be implemented by fully integrated executive bodies, taking account of the strong European dimension;

Sevently, the contribution that this State can make to peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland, in implementation of the spirit of paragraphs 6 to 8 of the Joint Peace Declaration.

I see two changes as being vital to an enduring peace. First, there must be genuine equality and partnership in Northern Ireland. An establishment still mainly associated with one side of the community must give way to a spirit of partnership at all levels.

Northern Ireland can only work successfully, if it is equally owned for the first time by Unionist and Nationalist. No one should underestimate the transformation of attitudes on all sides that this will require.

The second essential change is the acceptance of substantial links between North and South, in the spirit of the original settlement of 1920, and reflecting the fact that one community cannot unilaterally determine on a majoritarian basis whether or not there will be any links between North and South.

I am convinced we should establish an integrated approach in many areas - the most important of which are inward investment, tourism, many elements of agriculture and fisheries, a clean and pure environment, energy and communications - an integrated approach, that will eliminate wasteful competition and vested interests North and South. and that will equitably distribute the benefits throughout the island.

These areas include ones where the South has most to give and the North most to gain from such cooperation. The future prosperity of Ireland depends on a bold and radical approach.

We should put politics aside, and decide what is of most material benefit to the people throughout this island, entirely without prejudice to constitutional positions. After all, the existence of all-Ireland executive bodies such as the main churches, the trade unions and sporting organisations over 70 years has been without prejudice to anyone's constitutional position.

What we need is a new political system, an agreed Ireland, with which everyone can fully identify, from whatever standpoint they come.

Then we can safely leave the resolution of constitutional differences, which will have a much reduced importance, to the healing effects of time.