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Reference Code: 2021/98/5

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Address by the Taoiseach, Mr. John Bruton, T.D. at the Opening of the
Substantive All-Party Negotiations at Castle Buildings, Belfast
on Monday, 10 June 1996

Prime Minister, Independent Chairmen, Fellow Delegates,

I am privileged to lead the Irish Government delegation here for the opening of the negotiations that were announced for today in the Joint Communiqué issued following the meeting between the Prime Minister and me on 28 February. I feel privileged because all of us here today have a great opportunity to accomplish good for all the people of this island and of our neighbouring island. I am very conscious of the enormity of the responsibility that is placed upon us all and the formidable challenge that faces us.

The challenge is nothing less than to overcome the legacy of history, to heal the divisions which have resulted from it, and to remove the causes of a conflict which has deeply affected all of us in these islands but particularly the people of Northern Ireland. A difference about allegiance is the most fundamental of

all possible political differences. And resolving such a difference is the most difficult of all political tasks.

The divisions within Northern Ireland and within the island are part of the enduring historic legacy of wider British-Irish relations. The origins and context of those divisions transcend Northern Ireland itself. They encompass the totality of relationships involved - those within Northern Ireland, within the island of Ireland and between the peoples of these islands. The structuring of the negotiations commencing today in three inter-locking strands reflects those key relationships. As the Ground Rules paper says, the purpose of the negotiations is to achieve a new beginning for those relationships and to agree new institutions and structures to take account of their totality.

But at another level, the purpose is to ensure that violent conflict will never again blight the lives and hopes of entire generations. Over the past twenty seven years, in particular, violence caused immense human suffering. For too many, the burden of that suffering remains a daily and profoundly difficult reality. Our thoughts must go, today, to all those victims of brutal and terrible violence that, from whatever source and whatever its rationale, was never

justified. We mourn all those whose lives were taken. We think of all those who were wounded, and injured, too many of whom will suffer on, in great pain, all their lives. We are conscious of the homes where there are empty chairs and of the lost promise of lives, young and not so young, blighted by imprisonment. We grieve for those who bear the burden of bereavement and loss.

I am particularly conscious of the reality of violent death and of the grief of the bereaved, coming today, as I do, from the funeral of the late Garda Gerry McCabe, mercilessly cut down in the prime of life. In this gathering of public representatives I also recall, with

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sadness, the loss by violent means of such elected representatives as Sir Norman Stronge, Jack Barnhill, Edgar Graham, Paddy Wilson, Billy Fox, the Rev. Robert Bradford, Airey Neave, John Davey, John Turnley, Ian Gow, Eddie Fullerton.

As we seek, in these negotiations, to promote change, we must take particular account of, and be sensitive to the position of those who have suffered directly from violence and injustice, from whatever source. But, ultimately, the best service we can render to the victims of the conflict is to tackle the causes in

such a way that the nightmare of violence will never return. That is the objective of all of us who are gathered here today.

From the time he took office, Prime Minister John Major has devoted enormous resources of time and effort to advancing the resolution of the problems that bring us here. The Downing Street Declaration has been a major catalyst for peace and reconciliation. From the moment that I took office as Taoiseach, he and I have been in constant contact. It has required lengthy and vigorous discussions between the two Governments before we could establish the agreements we have now reached, as a firm basis to facilitate meaningful and constructive negotiations. The Prime Minister has, throughout, been animated by a truly indomitable resolve to consolidate peace by bringing all parties into a process of face-to-face dialogue.

Both Governments have accepted that we share a responsibility to lead the process of overcoming the divisions of the past and the search for a new accommodation. In exercise of our leadership role, the two Governments have described a shared understanding of the parameters of a possible outcome to the negotiations in the Framework Document, A New Framework for Agreement. Both Governments having acknowledged our responsibility, it is essential that we discharge it actively and fully.

I wish to say a very warm thank you to the distinguished international figures who have accepted our invitation to undertake the role of independent Chairmen and to extend a hearty welcome to their presence here today. Senator George Mitchell from the United States, General John de Chastelain from Canada and former Prime Minister Harri Holkeri, from Finland, have already given outstanding service to the peace process. As members of the International Body on Decommissioning, they acted with impeccable independence, integrity and impartiality but also with outstanding effectiveness. They produced, in short order, an exemplary report which achieved a remarkable degree of acceptance across the political spectrum. That report continues to be immensely useful.

It is against that background that I and my colleagues in the Irish Government appreciate so much their willingness to play a crucially important role in steering highly important aspects of the negotiations. Under the proposed arrangements agreed by the two Governments, Senator Mitchell, with the help of his colleagues, will also assist us in giving effect to our joint commitment, in the Ground Rules paper, to use our influence to ensure that all items on the comprehensive agenda are fully addressed in the negotiating process and to doing so with a view to overcoming any obstacles which may arise. This will involve crucial and complex tasks that will call on all the skill that we know George Mitchell and his colleagues have.

In Ireland, we are fortunate that we have many friends overseas, who have taken a deep and sympathetic interest in the building of peace on this island. But they have gone well beyond benign interest. In their different ways, they have made direct, practical inputs of support. I want today, to pay particular tribute to President Bill Clinton of the United States and his Administration, to the governments of Finland and of each of our other fellow-members in the European Union, to the European Commission and to successive governments of Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

The presence of Senator Mitchell here today and the role he is to play are tangible evidence of the unwavering support of President Clinton, his Administration and the United States Congress for the peace process. The involvement of Mr. Holkeri and General de Chastelain eloquently symbolise and reflect the support on which we can rely, both in Europe and in the wider world. But they also evoke the heartfelt wish of the tens of millions of Irish descent, of both traditions, spread throughout the world that we should grasp this opportunity to make the name of Ireland a byword for peace, creativity, generosity of spirit and hope and not for strife, intransigence, dark deeds and despair.

For like the vast majority of the people living here, the Irish diaspora have realised that this is a moment of hope, that there is now an unrivalled opportunity for a historic compromise between the two different viewpoints in Ireland, represented, on the one hand, by those founders of the United Irishmen who gathered together at McArd's Fort on Cave Hill almost 201 years ago today, to swear their compact to work for Irish independence and, on the other, those sons of Ulster who, 81 years ago, were marching towards the Somme in the service of king and country.

The talks we begin today respond to the great yearning for lasting peace on the part of the people, South and North, that we saw again in the massive public demonstrations for peace held throughout Ireland, following the ending by the IRA of their ceasefire last February. The talks offer the first chance, for over 70 years, for all involved, including those who have traditionally relied on physical force, to get around the same table to map out a future of peace, of justice, of hope.

The campaigning demand of the Republican movement has been "Peace Talks Now". Today is now. It is a matter of grave disappointment to my Government that Sinn Féin are not at this table today.

Without, in any way, compromising on our principles of non-violence, consent and democracy, we worked long and hard to ensure that the process starting today would be meaningful and serious and would commence in conditions that would enable them to be inclusive. We fully established those conditions.

But I recognise

The responsibility for ensuring that Sinn Féin can take part now rests clearly on the IRA, who have the capacity to restore unequivocally the cessation of violence of August 1994.

There will be no change in the position of the two Governments. That position is rooted in democracy. And our insistence on this core value can come as no surprise to Sinn Féin. This

is because they know that the very first of the principles set down by the International Body is a "total and absolute commitment to democratic and exclusively peaceful means of resolving political issues". They have already said that in the context of all-party talks, they could subscribe to these principles.

It runs completely counter to the logic of the peace strategy Sinn Féin have proclaimed, and of the Mitchell Principles that Sinn Féin have accepted, that the IRA have not yet put in place the democratic basis for Sinn Féin participation in these negotiations - a complete cessation of violence. To fail to do so without delay would be to let down those who voted for Sinn Féin as a means of strengthening the peace process. It would also be a bitter disappointment to Irish people everywhere, not least to the Irish in America who helped to capture the interest of President Clinton in this island's affairs.

Let us also remind ourselves that another one of the Mitchell Principles is to urge that so-called punishment killings and beatings stop and to take effective to prevent such actions.

For the IRA not to call a complete ceasefire now would also be to let down John Hume who took enormous political risks in order to help bring Sinn Féin in from the margins into democratic and inclusive politics.

It is, of course, very true that, as Seamus Mallon has recently emphasised, the SDLP is more than capable of representing and putting the case of Northern

nationalists in these talks. I know that they will do so, with vigour and to good effect. I salute the consistent dedication of the SDLP to democratic, constitutional politics, their passionate and consistent rejection of violence for political ends and their unremitting search for peace, justice and accommodation, despite misrepresentation and pressure.

Next, I want to address myself to the representatives of that other historic tradition, the Ulster unionists. Ulster's unionists are a proud community, who have given much to this land, to Britain, to the United States and to the wider world. As the poet, John Hewitt put it they are firmly rooted in the soil of this island - "no strangers here". It is, I believe, natural that the Irish Government have a particular concern for Northern nationalists who express their identity in an Irish context and allegiance.

But for us, the people of Ireland are all those who live on this island, including those who have a British allegiance and who prefer to express their Irishness within a British framework. Of course, it remains the wish of the Government to see the coming together of the people of Ireland, in their diverse traditions and allegiances, on the basis of consent and agreement, freely given, without coercion of any kind.

But I recognise that unionists approach the negotiations from a different standpoint. Throughout my political career, I have sought, with, I hope, some success, to understand the outlook and anxieties of unionists and to urge that we in the Republic show openness to unionists' views, concerns, interests and allegiances.

And this new openness has had many other manifestations. Irish nationalism has undertaken a process of reflection and redefinition. Constitutional nationalists, North and South, now accord full recognition, not only to unionists' distinct ethos and cultural identity, but to the centrality of their British allegiance in their identity. Nationalists also, in their vast majority, fully accept the need for consent and agreement.

In these negotiations, my Government stand ready fully to engage with the concerns that unionists have. We aim, on an even-handed basis, at a new political dispensation that is fair to all, that threatens nobody and that has space for the identities and rights of all. I would hope that unionists, for their part, confident in the strength of their community and their position, will resolve to engage seriously with legitimate nationalist concerns. I acknowledge recent positive signals, for example in the Ulster Unionist Party manifesto for the recent election. I know too that we in the South, and nationalists generally, will have to work hard to gain unionist trust.

It is in this spirit that I greet the major unionist parties here today. I also welcome the presence of the loyalist parties who have played a constructive part in helping to maintain peace on the island of Ireland and who have given representation to the diversity of interests and thinking within unionism, a diversity also reflected in the presence here of the United Kingdom Unionists.

I am glad to meet here again the representatives of the Alliance Party who, despite occasional discouragement, have continued to advocate an approach in politics that bridges the community divide and brings people together in common cause.

I also welcome the new perspectives that will be brought to the discussions here by the representatives of the Women's Coalition and of Labour and I look forward to their active participation.

The Irish Government enter these negotiations, aiming to tackle, in a constructive and creative way, the root causes of conflict. To Northern nationalists, I say that we in the South, no less than others, failed, in the early decades of the construction of our own State, to give adequate practical, as distinct from rhetorical, attention to the protection of your rights, including to the expression of your identity. If the future is to be one of peace and of hope, there can be no domination of nationalists by unionists and, equally, none of unionists by nationalists. In our view, there is a need for substantial and significant change, in accordance with the principles set out in the Joint Framework Document agreed with the British Government. Northern Ireland can only work successfully if it inspires, for the first time, an equal sense of ownership on the part of unionists and nationalists. There must be parity of esteem and of treatment in all spheres for Northern nationalists - and for unionists.

It is also essential to have a balanced constitutional accommodation. This calls for the acceptance of substantial links between North and South, in the spirit of the original settlement of 1920, reflecting what the recent Ulster Unionist Party manifesto describes as "assisting those who wish to see closer relations with the Irish Republic for wider aspirational

reasons". But I accept, or rather insist, that, in order to reassure unionists there also has to be the basic safeguard supplied by the principle of consent.

The need to build trust starts now. I therefore hope that all will enter the negotiations in a positive spirit, a spirit of reconciliation, of generosity, of readiness to compromise. All involved in a process such as this must be prepared to think their way into the minds of their traditional antagonists, to try to understand their fears, their concerns and their aspirations.

Everyone now agrees that this conflict can only be resolved by dialogue. It is important that people now have the courage to translate that intellectual conviction, into practical compromises and agreements around this talks table.

Those who thirst for peace and for a better future, will not understand it if we allow the opening of the negotiations to get bogged down in recriminations or in arguments over procedure. It is a time for courageous leadership and for statesmanship. Three quarters of a century ago, not far from where we meet today, King George V said:

"I appeal to all Irishmen to pause, to stretch out the hand of forbearance and conciliation, to forgive and forget and to join in making the land which they love a new era of peace, contentment and goodwill".

In those fraught times, times of violence and discord throughout the world, that poignant appeal did not achieve its object. Now, where previous generations fell short, it falls to this generation of political leaders and representatives to achieve the vision.

I hope we are equal to the challenge. The Irish Government certainly aims to be so and remains resolute in our determination that these negotiations will lead to a balanced and honourable settlement, acceptable to all.