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Reference Code:	2022/45/289
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Remarks by the Taoiseach at the Presentation of Shamrock

The White House, March 17, 1999

Mr President, Mr Vice President, Madam Secretary, Distinguished Guests:

- It is an honour and privilege to again have the opportunity to convey St. Patrick's Day greetings to you and to the people of the United States. It is a day which allows us to recall and celebrate the bonds of heritage, affection and common interest which unite our two countries.

- You have always been very generous Mr President in acknowledging the contribution which Irish immigrants, of all traditions, and their children have made to the development of this great country. It is a record of magnificent achievement, of which we in Ireland are justly proud. At the same time, the United States - particularly under your leadership - has demonstrated remarkable solidarity with the developing modern Ireland.

- On the two issues which most impact on the welfare of the people of Ireland, the United States has made an immense contribution. These are, of course, the development of a strong economy which provides a decent livelihood for all of our people and ending the nightmare of violence and political unrest in Northern Ireland.

- US investment has been central to Ireland's economic success story of recent years. Over 500 US Companies employ more than 65,000 people in Ireland accounting for some 40% of total Irish exports. This is a

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win-win relationship which benefits both the people of Ireland and the overall competitiveness and profitability of the US corporate sector. Indeed, according to the US Department of Commerce, Ireland is one of the most profitable locations for US investment overseas.

- I was delighted, Mr President, that you had an opportunity to gain a first hand experience of the strength and vibrancy of the Irish-US economic relationship during the course of your visit to Ireland last September. We were delighted to have the opportunity to welcome you and the First Lady back to Ireland on what was another hugely successful visit. The extraordinarily enthusiastic reception which was accorded you both is a measure of the high esteem and affection in which you are held by the people of both parts of Ireland.

- In the struggle for peace and political stability in Northern Ireland the role of the United States has been of critical importance. We would not be at this point of hope and historic opportunity were it not for the support and encouragement of the United States.

- That US role was personally led and directed by you Mr President. The constancy of your commitment over 6 years has never faltered. Your personal involvement and willingness to take risks ended the climate of despair, confounded those who saw Northern Ireland as a sterile zero-sum game and created a new mood of hope and optimism on the island.

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Last St. Patrick's Day in this room (the Roosevelt Room) you, Mr President, directed your remarks to the leaders of Northern Ireland as they approached the final phase of the negotiations: you said:

> ***This is the chance of a lifetime for peace in Ireland. you must get it done. You must do it for yourselves and your children.***

I wish to report, Mr President, that we heard you loud and clear. In the negotiation of the Good Friday Agreement, we have got it done. Through the heroic good offices of Senator Mitchell and your own late night personal diplomacy, the two Governments and the parties did negotiate and agree a comprehensive new beginning for all of the key relationships on the island of Ireland and between Ireland and Britain: a new beginning founded on the principles of partnership, equality, mutual respect and the rejection of violence for political ends.

One major challenge remains. We have agreed a framework for peace. Now we must implement it in all of its aspects.

A great deal of progress has been made in the process of implementation. An overwhelming majority of the people of the island have endorsed the Agreement, giving it a powerful democratic mandate. The Irish and British parliaments have passed comprehensive legislation providing for the establishment of the new political institutions; new human rights agencies are being established in both jurisdictions; well over half of the paramilitary prisoners have been released; security measures are being progressively normalised; and separate Commissions

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are currently enquiring into the future of the police service and the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland.

- While much has been achieved, a great deal remains to be done, not least the establishment of the new interlocking political institutions and the implementation of the provisions on arms decommissioning. The current impasse relating to these issues is troubling. At the core of this impasse is the underlying problem of the absence of trust. Building trust is a collective task in which all must play their part.

- We have all come too far to let this apparent impasse undo the progress that has been made. The parties did not take the risks they did during the negotiations to fail at this late stage. The two Governments, supported by the US Administration, did not invest a huge political effort to now contemplate defeat. The people of the island - who massively endorsed the Agreement - will simply not tolerate a reversion to the old ways. Failure is not an option.

- All of us who have worked at breaking the current impasse realise that there are genuine political constraints on each side. There is nothing to be gained from pointing the finger of blame. Rather, we must rededicate ourselves in the weeks ahead to work intensively with the parties, and with General de Chastelain, to find the additional political space which will allow an accommodation to be reached on this most difficult issue.

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- I am confident that, with your crucial support, Mr President, and that of Vice President Gore, we can find that space. We can build that additional element of trust and confidence that will enable us to proceed with the full implementation of the Agreement. We will finish the course and create a new beginning in Northern Ireland that all people of Irish heritage can be proud.

- Thank you.

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Speaker's Lunch

The Capitol, 17 March 1999

Remarks by the Taoiseach

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Mr. President, Mr. Speaker, Distinguished Members of Congress,

It is a great honour for me to be here today to celebrate St. Patrick's Day with our friends from both parties, and both Houses, of the United States Congress.

I am particularly pleased, Mr. Speaker, that on this your first year in office, you decided to maintain the tradition of hosting this wonderful event. Forgive us if we in Ireland see this as merely further proof of your widely recognised good sense and sound judgement!

I am delighted, Mr. Speaker that you will shortly have an opportunity to visit Ireland. We look forward to welcoming you on that occasion, and to giving you an opportunity to experience at first hand the many changes taking place in Irish life, very often with a significant US input.

Your planned visit, Mr. Speaker, is indicative of the continued strengthening of our relations with Congress. This has been greatly helped by the establishment of the US-Ireland Interparliamentary Group, under whose auspices delegations from both Congress and the Irish Parliament have exchanged visits. We look forward to welcoming the US delegation in Dublin later this year.

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I would also like to take this opportunity to express appreciation for the remarkable contribution of the leaders of the Friends of Ireland and the Ad Hoc Committee for Irish Affairs. I see many of you here today, and I salute you for your consistent endeavours in support of the peace process.

Mr. Speaker,

When I spoke at this event last year, the talks were entering their final phase. I said then that a political agreement would not be easy, but I also said I was confident that with the necessary commitment and determination from the various parties, we could meet our goal.

As you know, a historic Agreement was reached last Good Friday. This was made possible in large part by the courage of political leaders on both sides of the divide - many of whom are with us today. All of these will, I think, agree with me that the support and encouragement which they received from Capitol Hill was a powerful incentive for accommodation and agreement. They will also agree that the role played by you, Mr. President, was also of critical importance, not least your persistent and well-directed telephone diplomacy throughout that long last night of the negotiations. We thank all of you, including the outstanding Chairman of the Talks, George Mitchell, from the bottom of our hearts.

The challenge we now face is to turn the opportunity offered by the Agreement into reality. People in both parts of Ireland, voting on the same issue on the same day, for the first time since 1918 to endorse the Agreement by large

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majorities. The will of the people, democratically expressed, is clear: they want to see the Agreement implemented and put into effect.

With the help of the party leaders, and in cooperation with the British Government, a good deal has already been accomplished. For example, work on establishing new human rights machinery is well advanced. The program of prisoner releases is continuing, and a comprehensive policing review is under way. And, most recently, we reached agreement on the list of cross-border bodies and on the designation of the Northern Ireland departments.

Welcome as this is, there is inevitably concern, as the first anniversary of the Agreement draws near, that the timetable for implementation has fallen behind schedule in some key areas. If we are to realise fully the potential of the Agreement, there is an urgent need to restore momentum to the implementation process.

In saying this, I do not minimise the remaining difficulties, including on the difficult question of decommissioning. However, I am convinced that with flexibility and imagination on all sides, a way will be found, consistent with the Agreement, to resolve these problems. In many instances, the obstacle to progress is lack of trust, not surprising perhaps given all that has gone before. The most effective way to overcome suspicion, and to restore trust, is to proceed with the faithful implementation of the Agreement. This, of course, is what the Agreement requires, but, in addition by boosting confidence, it creates an environment which is itself helpful to the resolution of outstanding problems.

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Mr. Speaker,

Notwithstanding the difficult issues we face, I am confident that we will continue to move forward, and that the parties will once again show that same determination and leadership which brought a successful outcome last Good Friday, despite great odds. For my part, I pledge that the Irish Government will spare no effort to resolve the outstanding difficulties. History, or our people, will not forgive us if we let this prize slip from our grasp. I am confident we will succeed.

At this crucial time, we draw strength from the knowledge that our friends in the United States, on a bipartisan basis, stand ready to help in any way they can. Your even-handed approach, and your readiness to listen to all sides, uniquely equip you for that role. We are determined that the opportunity offered by the Agreement for a new beginning, based on equality and mutual respect - qualities which have inspired these great United States - will not be wasted. With your help we will succeed.

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