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Chris Patten at NYU Ireland House
New York, Wednesday 22 September, 1999

General

1. Chris Patten was guest of honour at a reception hosted by the American Ireland Fund in NYU Glucksman Ireland House, on 22 September, 1999. Joining him were Policing Commission members Senator Maurice Hayes, Dr. Gerry Lynch and Ms. Kathy O'Toole. Those in attendance included several leading members of the Irish American community in New York and of the policing community generally. Patten spoke eloquently movingly and humourously without notes and took an interesting Q&A session. Although other Commission members were invited to speak, only Senator Hayes availed briefly of the opportunity. In a brief but very warm introduction by Loretta Brennan Glucksman, Patten and his colleagues were praised for their contribution to the peace process, a contribution which she compared to that of Senator George Mitchell.

Chris Patten

2 Patten described his task as one of the biggest and toughest challenges which he has faced. Recalling that the Commission had met various people in the US and Canada, he said that as the Good Friday Agreement owed a great deal to the support of public servants in the US, particularly Senator Mitchell, so his Report owed a great deal to what had been learned from the policing community in North America

3 He saw the challenge as particularly tough for the Commission because while the parties had agreed a great deal in the Good Friday Agreement they had not been able to agree on policing, largely because policing went right to the heart of most of the really sensitive issues in Northern Ireland. He noted "what they were able to agree was a set of terms of reference and I think that we, as an independent Commission, met those terms of reference absolutely to the letter and to the spirit".

4 Patten said that Commission members found themselves "to a degree" in the role of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. He recalled that there had been some 40 public meetings, that Kathy O'Toole and Gerry Lynch "had some interesting experiences of Irish hospitality" and that Senator Hayes had been accused of belonging to some organisations "that maybe he should have belonged to but they decided not to have him".

5 He recalled a particularly tough evening when he and Senator Hayes met with Gervaghy Road residents. He said that they had heard some propaganda but also "some harrowing tales" - from one of the sisters of Robert Hamill "who had been kicked to death by a group of Loyalists thugs some thirty or forty feet from a police landrover" and from a

farmer whose two young sons had been gunned down in front of an eight year old

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daughter. He noted that the meeting "had been chaired with considerable skill, and considerable courage by Rosemary Nelson".

6 Later that evening they had travelled to Craigavon where they met with the widows of four RUC officers, one of whom said that her late husband was not a Catholic but regarded himself as a Christian rather than a Protestant. Patten remarked that while he was aware of the great *demand* for reconciliation, he wondered at times how much *supply* there was. And yet, he said, looking at the opinion polls and talking to the ordinary people in the street, regardless of what they suffered, they wanted the Good Friday Agreement to hold and to work "because the alternative is literally unthinkable".

7 Patten described the main purpose of the Report as an attempt to take politics out of policing and said that there was an extraordinary paradox about some of the criticism leveled at the Report. He argued that at the heart of the Good Friday Agreement was "a simple but honourable bargain - in return for Nationalists and Republicans accepting that political change in Northern Ireland could only come about politically and democratically, Unionists recognised that Nationalists didn't have to demonstrate a primary loyalty to the institutions of the Northern Ireland State, that they could have other loyalties and aspirations provided that they signed up to the disciplines of democracy" and in that spirit it was now possible to become a member of the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive. He noted that all members of the Assembly had agreed a new emblem for themselves, "no crown, six pieces of flax" in "about three nano-seconds" and commented" so why, we thought to ourselves when we were writing our Report, should only the police be identified with the central political argument". He felt sure that his colleagues on the Commission would agree that the greatest disservice they could give to police officers in Northern Ireland was to keep them at the centre of political argument.

8 The Commission had accordingly tried "to propose policing answers to policing questions: He stressed the need for democratic responsibility and for a clear identification of where responsibility should lie. He said that the Commission had learned much from such police officers as John Timoney and Bill Bratton about orienting policing on the neighborhood and on composition and recruitment. Referring to the current composition of the RUC he said, "everybody knows that to be successful a police service has to reflect the community which it serves" and "everybody knows that to do that takes time". He described his proposals as "pretty heroic", emphasising that the evidence showed that a 15-16% threshold was needed before it was possible to make an impact on the culture of a police service.

9 As regards reaction to the Report, Patten said that there had been " a pretty fair response" from the Northern Ireland press and the same in the Nationalist community. He noted that Sinn Fein were still debating among themselves and listening to their membership while the DUP had not been "wildly enthusiastic". He was afraid that for the UUP the report had come "at a very difficult moment" but he noted the Belfast Telegraph description of their reaction as "intemperate". He noted that the UUP had now established its own working committee on policing and said he looked forward with interest to its findings.

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10 Finally, he expressed his personal gratitude to Senator Hayes and to other Commission members particularly Kathy O'Toole and Gerry Lynch "who brought huge commitment and personal integrity to the work and for whose wisdom and expertise the people of Northern Ireland should be grateful". Patten said in conclusion that the Commission had done its job and that he hoped they would help to "bed down. the peace process" by which he meant bringing about a peaceful society in Northern Ireland.

Maurice Hayes

11 Senator Hayes stressed that the Report was founded in the Good Friday Agreement, that the Commission had not started with a blank sheet but with very precise instructions and in his view "we have brought it home". He stressed some recurrent themes of the report viz accountability, transparency, respect for human rights, more representative nature and efficiency. He believed that police officers would be "liberated" to do the jobs they wanted to do but the real test will be when a youth in Ballymurphy can safely stand up and say he wants to join the police. That was the reason why it was important for all groups, church and sports etc to become involved because at the end of the day an organisation can only be changed from the inside not from the outside. He recalled a comment made by an elderly lady after a particularly "lively" Commission session on the Shankhill Road ("Son, youse can only do your best") and said he would be happy if the fact that they had done their best was the Commission's epitaph.

Q&A

12 Asked about implementation of the Report, Patten said that while some of the recommendations were affected by the security and political situation e.g. democratic accountability would be affected by the existence or otherwise of an Assembly and an Executive, he believed that a huge number of the recommendations could and should be implemented anyway e.g. as regards structure and training. He also stressed the importance of the Oversight Commissioner not only as a means of driving the changes forward but also as mediator to evaluate claims that the security situation did not permit implementation of particular recommendations

13 On British media criticism of the Report, Patten noted that the criticism was heaviest in the right wing press whereas commentaries in the Independent, Financial Times, Guardian and Economist had been more positive. He referred scathingly to the "parade of ex-Stickies and convicted murderers" in the columns of the British right wing press, noting that some who were now leaping to the defense of the RUC were in the past, "on the other side of the barbed wire" and referring to the old rule of politics that those who move from one extreme to the other are usually the most virulent in their views.

14 On reactions from within the RUC itself, Patten noted the "measured" response from the Chief Constable and said that while there had been complaints regarding the changes of name and emblems from the Police Federation and the Superintendent's Society, these two organisations had been "pretty positive" about some of the other recommendations.

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Newspapers had reported interviews with widows and RUC officers who were critical but also some reports from officers who were positive on the changes proposed. He stressed that a lot in the Report derived from comments of police officers some of whom would feel that 70-80% of what was being proposed was what they talked about e.g. "de-layering management", importance of training and retraining "all those sorts of issues which people who know nothing at all about policing see as some sort of hidden agenda for handing over Northern Ireland to ... Libya". He emphasised that most of the people shouting loudest about the recommendations knew absolutely nothing about policing.

15 Asked about unanimity within the Commission and whether there was ever a prospect of a minority report, Patten said that at the very outset he feared there might be eight reports rather than one. However, in the course of the deliberations there had been a coming together as arguments were recognised, sometimes reluctantly, that recommendations had to be realistic. He instanced the use of Plastic Baton Rounds (PBRs) noting that there was a wish initially to ban their use completely but when it was understood that if faced with people throwing petrol bombs or blast bombs the alternative was live rounds, restrictions on the use of PBR's became the preferred option.

16 Asked whether measures by the US Congress to discourage cooperation between the FBI and RUC were helpful, Patten noted that sometimes politicians here as in Northern Ireland could act through ill-considered intentions or through no intentions at all except motivated by a cheap vote and that this could make things a lot more difficult for the peace process. He said he did not know why a politician in Washington should think he had more to contribute to this debate than Seamus Mallon or why such a politician should be much more certain about things than Gerry Adams. He noted that he would be speaking to Congressman Gilman's Committee in Washington on Friday and if asked this question he would tell them that he hoped politicians would think twice before they behaved in this way. He felt that one of the best things for improving the culture within the RUC was cooperation with other police forces, particularly the Garda Siochana and asked who had done more to further this than the FBI with its joint training programme at Quantico. He asked rhetorically what would the Taoiseach or Nationalists in Ireland say about efforts to frustrate this cooperation and he hoped that there would be less of knee jerk reactions in the future, noting the Congressional Districts were scarcely decided on what position was taken on this particular issue.

17 Asked whether it was realistic to expect to separate politics and policing, Patten said that whereas politics and policing have gone together in some other countries this was not the case "in most liberal democracies". In the US and in the UK the policing service was there to defend the rule of law not to be an arm of the State. He felt it was "unfair" to treat the police service in Northern Ireland differently, that this had caused "a lot of decent men and women to get shot" and this situation should be changed..

18 Asked whether his Report would endure better than others, such as the Hunt Report, Patten believed it would. He said that the Commission had the Hunt Report very much in mind while it was working, in order to avoid "saying more than the market could bear".

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He thought his Report would stand the test of time because he felt that anyone who was involved in the mainstream debate about modern policing would not find any of its content surprising. The Commission had consulted with the best police chiefs and best academics and had used its common sense but the main reason why it would endure was because he thought non-one could come up with anything better than the Good Friday Agreement. He noted in this regard that he was very sorry for Senator Mitchell who having done the difficult bit in securing the Agreement had seen the easy bit "screwed-up" by politicians.

19 A final question from the floor was posed to John Timoney as to whether there were lessons for the RUC in measures taken to improve composition of minorities in the NYPD. Timoney said that firstly you were less likely to take "free swings" at African-Americans or Hispanics if you had African-Americans or Hispanics "standing nearby" - the same he felt would be true for Catholics in Northern Ireland. He also stressed the importance of training to improve the professionalism of the force. He believed that it was necessary to have transparent accountability systems and that it was important to put things in writing to help people avoid violating the rules. Finally, he emphasised the importance of constant follow-up and referred with approval in this regard to the Commission's proposal to have an outside team overseeing the changes envisaged.

Adrian McDaid
Deputy Consul General
New York
23 September, 1999

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