

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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Reference Code:	2022/84/47
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North/South Ministerial Council

Inaugural Plenary Meeting, Armagh, 13 December 1999

Remarks by Taoiseach

First Minister, Deputy First Minister, Tánaiste, Ministerial colleagues and friends

This is a day quite unlike any other. It is unprecedented in my political career, in the political career of anyone else here, or in the political career of anyone who has ever served the people of this island. For the first time, elected Ministers, drawn from both our great traditions, and from both parts of the island, are gathered together in one room, with a shared objective: to work for the common good of all the people.

The pace of recent developments has been breathtaking - all the more so when compared to the long stagnation of the past. But all of us here know that the Good Friday Agreement itself, and the establishment of its institutions, were made possible only by painstaking work and through political courage. By working together we have succeeded so far. I am convinced we will continue to succeed. There will of course be difficult days ahead, but if we all remain firmly committed to the full implementation of the Agreement we will not fail.

The Agreement was powerfully endorsed by the people. They have made clear that they want the new institutions to work and to thrive. There is out there, despite inevitable concerns and anxieties, a powerful reservoir of goodwill and support. The institutions, including this Council, will, separately and as an interlocking whole, shape our future. But they also reflect existing realities. The Executive meets the desire of the people of peace and normality, and for you, their representatives, to work together.

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By the same token, the Council reflects the richness and variety of the ties which link us, North and South, on the island of Ireland. This is an historic day. The future is being built both on the present and on the valued past. This ancient cathedral city of Armagh symbolises the religious connections which span the island, across the range of denominations. There are powerful, and long-established, sporting, academic and professional links. The business community, North and South, has over the past decade forged ahead towards the creation of a true island economy, one capable of competing at the highest levels in the single European market and beyond. The Irish Congress of Trade Unions is led by a woman from Belfast.

But, above all, it is the people who have, at least until recently, been ahead of us, the politicians. Very many have social or family bonds which take no account of borders. And a vast majority, even of those who have no such ties, have wanted to rid the island of the scourges of conflict and sectarianism. They instinctively embrace the concepts of mutual understanding, reconciliation and partnership - even if the practical outworking of such ideals is inevitably complex.

This North/South Ministerial Council rests on solid foundations. But its success now depends on us. Today's agenda gives us a glimpse of the future. We'll be making decisions on Implementation Bodies, on areas of co-operation, and on future work. It is quite obvious that there is a huge amount to be done, despite the worthwhile practical progress made by our predecessors. For too long conflict and political division led us to turn our backs on one another, rather than to deal face-to-face. That era is now over, and today marks its end.

In my view, there is no area of our economic and social life without the potential for enhanced co-operation and common action. That is why I am accompanied today by all of my Ministerial colleagues. We are eager to get down to business, and look

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forward to doing so.

Of course, we approach the Council fully aware that it is not enough merely to assert the advantages of working together. They must be demonstrated. But, equally, we ask for a full chance to prove that co-operation and partnership are indeed the right ways to proceed. If the spirit and letter of the Agreement are honoured, there is no reason for anyone to fear co-operation or to obstruct common action.

The Council must work on the basis of three key principles. Any project or initiative must be capable of achieving mutual benefit. It must be done efficiently and effectively. And it must be done on the basis of agreement. Once those criteria are met we should together offer our whole-hearted support. Of course, over the months and years ahead, just like in every other area of public life, we'll have many tough debates about just what the right decision is. But, as we all know, that's the very heart of day-to-day politics.

The new North/South institutions are about achieving real, practical goals. But they're also, as an integral part of the Agreement, about the consolidation of peace and the promotion of reconciliation. Too many lives have been shattered or stunted by the collective failures of the past. Collectively, we have indeed paid a heavy price. But we know that we can, together, transcend the past. This meeting is symbolic of a different and better way. Working together in partnership for the people we serve and for the shared island we love, we can indeed make sure that the new beginning offered by the Agreement will lead to a better future. It is an objective worthy of all our people and a challenge to which we must all rise.

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