

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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For delivery This afternoon

Final version of Sec State speech. Sections marked on p 5 + 6 are new formulations, replacing, on our representations, more in-your-face language in first draft.

Mo Griffiths
Luke
25/11/99

l'Estrange
25.11.99

Re-building Northern Ireland

This is my first visit to a school in Northern Ireland, and I am delighted that it should be to Victoria College, which has such a long and illustrious history. I'm also very glad to see that you have invited some guests from neighbouring schools: girls from Dominican College and boys – heavily outnumbered I see – from St Malachy's.

It was with a certain trepidation that I agreed to speak to you today. My officials tell me that one of my predecessors once went to a school – which will remain nameless – with a formidable reputation in the world of Ulster schools rugby.

The Headmaster warned him that there would be a match that afternoon but he thought no more of it and carried on meeting and talking to pupils. Just as he was beginning to warm to his theme and felt his audience hang on his every word they began to get up and head for the door. Clearly the pupils found the choice between rugby and listening to a Secretary of State a very easy one to make.

I have taken the precaution of checking the fixtures list for today and I'm afraid you are not getting away that easily!

But I also hope that you recognise that we are approaching a crucial moment in Northern Ireland's history – a moment which could have a huge influence on the lives of your generation, and the decisions you will take about your own personal future.

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Since I came to Northern Ireland I have sometimes thought about what would have happened if I had been born here rather than in London - if I, my family and friends, had grown up during the Troubles. If I, instead of merely watching events unfold on television, had lived them day by day as people here have for the past 30 years.

In 1969 I would have been doing my GCEs against the backdrop of the start of the Troubles, as the debate over Civil Rights boiled over into the wider historic conflict. I would have seen the age old quarrel that has torn these islands apart for so long emerge once again to cast their violent shadow over the future of my generation, and that of my parents.

Three years later I would have seen the fall of Stormont, and then the failure of Sunningdale – and the beginning of the long years of Direct Rule. The years when the only guaranteed certainty was that Northern Ireland's politicians could not agree a way forward that would allow them to exercise power for their people. The long years of political failure.

And the long years of violence too. If I had been born here the hard fact is, like virtually every family in Northern Ireland, mine too would have been touched by violence. I would have seen the years when the death toll climbed inexorably higher and higher. The days when there were so many deaths in the space of just 24 hours that the Belfast Telegraph could not fit them all on to the front page. The days when one funeral merged into another as the procession of violence went on and on.

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That would have been the backdrop against which I would have grown up if my parents had been born here. That is the backdrop against which I would have had to make the decisions about my future – and whether that future should be in Northern Ireland or not – the decisions which you today also have to make.

But the backdrop against which you will be making those decisions is very, very different. For the first time in a quarter of a century your politicians next Thursday could be exercising real power. Direct rule could be a thing of the past. Local people with local accents – accountable to you - could be making the decisions about your education, your health service, your economy.

And they will be doing so in an environment in which there is less violence than at any time for the past 30 years. Of course the situation is not perfect, but no-one who has lived through the horrors of the past can truly deny that it has improved immensely.

And it has done so because for nearly a decade now your politicians have had the courage to work together for the future.

It has taken time and patience, but, step by step, month by month, year by year, the 1990s have seen your politicians come to an understanding about how they, and you, can go into the next Millennium in a way in which Northern Ireland is no longer a by-word for conflict, but is rather known as the place which showed the world how conflict can be resolved.

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And we are so nearly there. All the work has now come together in the Good Friday Agreement. As a result of what George Mitchell and the parties have done we now do have a basis for moving forward.

A new dispensation

On Saturday, the Ulster Unionist Council will face a defining moment. Since Senator Mitchell ended his review, I have met and talked to many unionists.

There is, I have discovered, an all-too familiar stereotype of unionists presented in some sections of the British media.

This misrepresents people who have had reason to feel under attack, have reacted both defensively and defiantly – sometimes, wrongly, meeting violence with violence – and who are rightly proud of their identity, culture and traditions and demand the freedom to express them.

The description sounds familiar, doesn't it? For unionists substitute nationalists. So much is shared and inter-changeable between these two communities. Both need a new dispensation in Northern Ireland: adherence to the principle of consent in return for fairness in the practice of government. Equality of treatment and no compromise with democracy.

And this is recognised by many more unionists than it is denied.

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In my meetings, I have been impressed by the seriousness with which they are now addressing a more difficult decision than most of us will ever have to face in our political lives.

There are fears, understandable fears, that have been expressed to me. Fears about the future of the Ulster Unionist Party. Fears about what will happen if devolution moves ahead and decommissioning does not follow in good time.

Let me say first that I understand and respect these fears. And let me do what I can this afternoon, without ignoring the wider public and political audience, to address them.

The first point I would make is that we should not underestimate the magnitude of David Trimble's achievement in getting to the position we are in now.

For years, republicans have said that they would not countenance what they called a partitionist Assembly. Local people taking local decisions, to meet local needs.

Today, Sinn Fein members sit at Stormont, and are on the brink of joining in the day to day business of executive government.

For years, Unionists have objected to the territorial claim in Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish constitution.

Today, the Irish Government are poised to remove these Articles permanently.

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For years, Unionists have complained about the Anglo Irish Agreement which they say was imposed on them against their will.

Today, it is about to be replaced by completely new arrangements which unionists have played a direct part in designing and planning.

For years, Sinn Fein have failed to satisfy Unionists on the decommissioning issue.

In the Mitchell review, David Trimble succeeded in persuading them to volunteer publicly that decommissioning is an essential part of the process.

For years, the IRA have so often confined themselves to threatening statements, and have ruled out decommissioning in uncompromising terms.

Last week there was an IRA statement acknowledging the leadership of Sinn Fein – the same leadership that has described decommissioning as an essential part of the process – and expressing readiness to appoint a representative for discussions with General de Chastelain's Decommissioning Commission.

I could give you a similar list of benefits for nationalists. Justice and equality. A share in power. An important North-South dimension. That is the whole point of the Agreement. It is a process of give and take. But the notion that it is all give by unionists and all take by

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nationalists is just plain wrong, and insulting to David Trimble and his negotiating team.

Decommissioning and Default

Will decommissioning happen? Like George Mitchell, I believe that it will.

I believe this for two reasons. The first is that Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness are, like David Trimble, forward-looking politicians, who – whatever their pasts – have staked their reputations and their futures on making this process work.

I believe they will use their influence. And I believe they will use it successfully.

The second is that they are also realists. They know that General de Chastelain is a man of complete integrity, who will not be put off by prevarication, or pretend that black is white. He will tell it as it is.

They also know that, if there is default on decommissioning, they will be diminished in the eyes of world opinion. A great many people will be disappointed. We and the Irish Government will act together, without delay, to suspend the institutions. I made this clear in the House of Commons on Monday. The Taoiseach confirmed it in the Dail on Tuesday.

There is therefore no way that anyone could profit from default on decommissioning. Or indeed on devolution, since the other side of

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the bargain is that devolved government will be established and implemented in good faith.

I have been asked what would actually happen after the institutions were suspended.

As I said in my statement on Monday, we would seek a way forward in co-operation with those committed to the process, based on the principles of the Good Friday Agreement. This agreement, unlike any of its predecessors, has been endorsed by the people and will remain our compass.

In the entirely new political context that would apply, the attitudes of some players cannot be predicted at this stage. But, I think, the desire to keep the deal on track would be great.

In the meantime, there would be a resumption of direct rule. I would hope that that period – during which we would be seeking ways to resume the working of all the institutions, as well as decommissioning – would be as short as possible. And during this interregnum, I would do my best to keep alight the flame and the spirit of devolution, maintaining political continuity as best I could.

The other night, one uncompromising Ulster Unionist fixed me with his eye and said, so it depends on you holding the line does it? For a moment, I felt pretty small. But I replied as I felt: I don't easily roll over for anyone, I am not a natural appeaser and I do have my own reputation to think about.

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I'm not sure I satisfied him, but I do feel the stakes are high – for all of us.

Confident Unionism

But we should not let fear of failure drive out the very real prospect of success.

The prospect, I repeat, is that, for the first time in a quarter of a century, Northern Ireland will see its representatives, its politicians running local affairs.

For so long in Northern Ireland that has been only the remotest of remote possibilities. But next week the dream could become reality.

Next week direct rule could end. Next week Northern Ireland could be standing on its own two feet. Ready to walk, with its head up, into the future.

That is why I passionately hope that on Saturday the Ulster Unionist Council will decide to break the deadlock and take the next decisive step forward, knowing that there is a lot to gain but that if the process fails, they will be no worse off.

If they do not, say yes, no-one should be under any illusion about the dangers that will lie ahead. The opportunity of a generation – your generation - would be lost. Whatever else we got, we would certainly not get decommissioning. There would be no guns and no government.

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My message to unionists today is this. Put aside the fear of failure.

Present the face of progressive, tolerant, confident unionism. A unionism that reaches beyond the politics of 'not an inch'. A unionism that is justifiably proud of its traditions, including its Orange ones, and knows they can flourish alongside the expression of Gaelic ones. A unionism that is on the front foot and comfortable in its co-existence with those who hold a democratic nationalist aspiration.

The prize is no less than the future of Northern Ireland. Grasp it and you will find out if republicans are for real. Reject it and you will never know.

Twenty-five years ago nobody would have imagined that my generation would have to wait as long as it has to see progress, to see Northern Ireland come to an understanding of what unites as well as divides it.

Too often, the rich traditions of Northern Ireland's twin communities have had their image sullied by the insolent demands of a few for rights that cut across the rights of the many.

But at their best these traditions make Northern Ireland what it is – a vibrant, creative society capable of great tolerance and inclusivity.

A society in which Orange and Green can live side by side in mutual respect, as keen to protect each other's rights as their own.

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I want to see a society you can, unreservedly, be proud to call your own. A future you will want to share. A Northern Ireland your generation will not want to leave.

I want you to be leaders in your country, not exiles from it. This weekend, we can <u>all</u> step into that future.

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