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Irish American Presidential Forum 2000
New York, 4 March 2000

The Irish American Presidential Forum took place as scheduled at John Jay College in New York on Saturday 4 March 2000. Vice President Gore was the only candidate who participated. The absence of any Republican politicians (including Congressman Peter King - one of the organisers) and the presence of several of the city's leading Democratic figures, including Congressman Joe Crowley, Senator Chuck Schumer and Secretary Andrew Cuomo, gave the event the air of a party rally rather than a bi-partisan forum. There was a significant media presence, with CNN, ABC and C SPAN carrying Gore's speech live and BBC and UTV also in attendance. Joe Carroll was there to report for the Irish Times.

The audience which had numbered just under 100 when the Forum got underway at 3.00 pm more than doubled in size during the two hours before Gore's appearance at 5.15 pm. In his brief introduction John Dearie, the MC for the afternoon, reminded the audience that there had only been 25/30 people present in 1992 when then Candidate Bill Clinton made his pledge on appointing a peace envoy. Dearie also indicated that some of the other candidates had sought to make appearances via television or to have their views conveyed by a representative but these requests had been refused.

Congressman Joe Crowley

Gore was introduced briefly by Congressman Crowley who noted that this was the former's third appearance at a forum of this type (he had appeared in 1988 and 1996). Crowley described the Vice President as "a steadfast supporter of Ireland" and he recalled the contribution made by the Clinton Administration to the peace process, from the granting of a visa to Gerry Adams to the role of George Mitchell. He mentioned the most recent initiative, to send Jim Steinberg to Northern Ireland for talks with the parties and with the two Governments. He said that while the audience might not hear from the Vice President everything they wanted to hear, they should remember that of all the candidates he alone had come and he had done so at a time of many other competing claims for his time as the campaign moved towards the Super-Tuesday primaries on 7 March.

Vice President Gore

Gore opened his remarks by quoting President Kennedy that the US and Ireland were two nations divided by distance but united by history. He said that he knew of the commitment of those present and of their knowledge of the intricate details of all issues affecting Ireland and relations between the US and Ireland and said "I share your values and I aspire to share your knowledge of those intricate details".

He referred to the forebears of Irish Americans fleeing persecution and famine and said that he had himself written on the subject of the Famine. He believed that it was a subject that should be

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studied more intensively in America's schools. He thought that "suffering binds us together" and noted that as a result of its history Ireland today contributes a larger percentage of its national income and a much larger number of volunteers than any other country for famine relief worldwide.

Just as Ireland reaches out so too does America to lands "where peace is but a dream". America recognised and shared the values of Irish Americans viz. hard work, strong family and close-knit community and sought to tackle discrimination such as the Irish had experienced in the days when "No Irish need apply" signs were only too common.

Believing that the US should promote peace with security throughout the world, he declared "I will stand for peace in Northern Ireland". He said that there could be no giving up and no going back. He recalled the time last November when Ireland had changed its Constitution and London had devolved power to Belfast and "a new Government with real autonomy came into being". He recognised that it was currently a very sensitive time and that there was a sense of frustration that the institutions "were now in suspension". He believed, however, that it was necessary to "carry the hopefulnesss" of that moment in November and that the best thing to do was to push forward.

He said that he was grateful for the leadership of the Taoiseach and the British Prime Minister and that he took heart from the other parties who understood, "as we do", that the Good Friday Agreement is the democratic mandate and that there is no turning back. " The Irish have spoken loudly, clearly, decisively".

He recalled that two years ago when the peace negotiations stood on the verge of success or failure, the US had invited the political leaders to the White House on St. Patrick's Day and said that those leaders would be brought together again this year. To dispel any rumours to the contrary, he declared that there would no restrictions on visas for or on contacts with the Sinn Féin leadership.

He declared that in a Gore Administration "we will stand ready, at a moment's notice, to support this process in any way the parties find useful". There would be "no let-up, no let-down, no turning back, no giving-up". In a Gore Administration " the issue of peace and justice in Northern Ireland will be in the very top rank of foreign policy priorities". There would be "an open door to the concerns of Irish Americans". If entrusted with the Presidency, he hoped to have the opportunity to visit Ireland and Northern Ireland, to stand in Dublin and Belfast, "to continue the tradition that President Clinton has begun".

While the Good Friday Agreement was a "victory", he noted that it was also only a beginning and that the journey must continue in the 21st century. He recalled the "substantial progress" on prisoner releases, on the work of the Human Rights Commission to draft a Bill of Rights, on the Policing Commission and on the new Assembly. He believed that the greatest hope lay in the fact that there was today still momentum for peace and that there was face to face discussions between the parties. He said that the parties had shown great wisdom and courage in negotiating the Good Friday Agreement and that he would say to them that "we need you to show that wisdom and courage yet again".

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In concluding he declared "I pledge to you that the cause of peace in the North will always be my cause". He pledged to work hard for peace in Northern Ireland so that it could be a light to other nations of the world, so that it could show to other troubled regions that it was possible to "live in diversity with harmony". He dreamed of a St. Patrick's Day in a future not many years from now, when it would be possible to have "a full sense of celebration and joy in our hearts that peace and harmony and security are truly ours".

Reaction

The Vice President's remarks were very well received and were met with applause at various points. The general reaction from some of the more knowledgeable media representatives with whom I spoke was that while it was a performance long on sound-bites but short on substance, this was not surprising in the circumstances. Some of the registered Republicans in the audience privately expressed unhappiness at some aspects of the proceedings, particularly the playing of Gore's campaign song as he made his entrance which they said had not been agreed . This cut little ice with other participants who pointed out that before complaining of the way things had gone, they might wish to reflect on the fact that all candidates had been invited and that in the sixteen years since such events had been held the Republican party had yet to deliver a candidate.

Reaction among some Irish American activists present was mixed. There was welcome, and indeed some relief, that despite other pressures the Vice President had agreed to come. His speech was, however, described as "bland" and it was noted that he had failed to answer all of the seven questions that had been posed in advance. Richard Harvey of the Brehon Law Society was busy during the afternoon collecting signatures calling for a public enquiry into the Rosemary Nelson murder. He spoke very favourably to me about the Taoiseach's call for a public enquiry into the Pat Finucane murder saying that he had recently spoken to Geraldine Finucane. She had told him that she had gone into the meeting with the Taoiseach with a series of points seeking to convince him of the need for such an enquiry and she had been overwhelmed and delighted when the Taoiseach had addressed virtually every single point in his opening remarks.

Adrian Mc Daid
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New York
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