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Speech by the Taoiseach Mr. Albert Reynolds TD at the
Annual Wolfe Tone Commemoration at Bodenstown,
Sunday, 18 October 1992 at 12.15 p.m.

Wolfe Tone was the first Irishman in modern times, who set out to win the full political independence of his country. In one of his most famous statements he defined the means to this aim as being: To unite the whole people of Ireland; to abolish all past dissensions; and to substitute the common name of Irishman in place of the denominations of Protestants, Catholic and Dissenter. He sought prior agreement among the people of Ireland as the best means of achieving the independence and unity of the whole country.

After over half a century of separate development, the two main political traditions in Ireland are beginning to get to know each other again and to discover all that we have in common. Their political representatives, including on this side members of the Government, are meeting for the first time in seventy years, apart from limited encounters in the 1960s and early 1970s. What brings us all together is a yearning for peace, the desire first expressed by Tone to leave the sterile divisions of centuries behind us.

The frozen political landscape is beginning to shift. To reach agreement will require generosity and enlightened understanding on all sides. The objective of the current talks should be to achieve a mutually acceptable accommodation that respects

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both traditions and that enables us to engage in constructive co-operation, for which there is vast scope, against the backdrop of European Union.

This century, with the backing of a democratic majority, political independence was achieved in the greater part of Ireland. But the ideal of full political unity has not been achieved in the absence of the unity of the Irish people, which is itself a legacy of history.

The moral force of that ideal was acknowledged at the time of the first Anglo-Irish Settlement in 1920 and 1921. In the Treaty the British Government accepted the principle of renunciation of sovereignty over any part of Ireland. But the thinking and intention behind the opt-out clause was that the people of Northern Ireland might remain part of the Union, if they so chose, for a time, until there was greater confidence between the majority of the people in the two parts of the country. That work of building mutual confidence has unfortunately been long delayed, but it is our most pressing task now.

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While acceptance of the reality of partition was part of the price of independence, the Irish people were nevertheless given clearly to understand that it was only intended to be temporary, that Northern Nationalists would be fairly treated on an equal basis with the Unionist population. Further, an institution would be established which would facilitate North-South cooperation and assist progress towards eventual reconciliation. Both the Government of Ireland Act 1920 and the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 were based on this concept of the essential unity of Ireland to be re-established as soon as practicable and accepted by the British Government as a desirable long-term aim. This balance was subsequently lost and forgotten.

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If new agreed political arrangements are to gain the legitimacy and consent that some of the old ones have conspicuously lacked, they must address equally and fairly the needs of both traditions. A balance must be restored between the recognition of existing constitutional realities and the acknowledgement of the value of a future that we believe would be best for all the people of Ireland. That future is desired by some, and recognized by many more as likely to happen eventually. Taking a positive view of Irish unity and encouraging it as a long-term solution is in no way incompatible with accepting the necessary principle of agreement and consent and does not conflict with any obligations that either Government have undertaken.

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The mainstream tradition of Irish nationalism since 1916 has always rejected any attempt to create a united Ireland by force or coercion. One has only to look at other parts of the world, at Cyprus or Yugoslavia, to see the disastrous consequences of adopting an approach based on territorial imperatives. On a smaller scale we see the tragedy of Northern Ireland, which has already cost 3,000 lives, where neither community is willing to be cast in the role of permanent minority.

Violence is in every sense a dead end. It is rejected by the overwhelming majority of the Irish people North and South as a means of tackling the problem that remains today. It is more urgent than ever to make a fresh start. The progress of the whole island North and South has been seriously retarded by the failure to reach any political agreement on how it may be shared in the future. One community stresses its links with Britain, the other wishes to strengthen the links between the two parts of Ireland. The two objectives are not necessarily incompatible, depending on the balance between them and the form that they may take. We wish to create a basis, which will over time allow the two parts of Ireland to grow closer together, in the context of close and friendly co-operation with Britain, both as neighbouring peoples with a great deal in common and as partners in the European Community.

The deep seated problem of Northern Ireland predates any Constitution. The Irish Constitution expresses the clearly expressed ideals of democratic republicanism. It puts people before territory. Article 1, which is often overlooked, speaks of the right of self-determination of the Irish nation. That is the element which remains the most important and which is unassailable. The Constitution also clearly pledges Ireland's support for the resolution of disputes by peaceful means. Since the early 1970s, to go back no further, the Irish State has pledged itself in many international agreements such as the CSCE to the same fundamental principles of conduct in international affairs. The Anglo-Irish Agreement envisaged that a united Ireland could be established with the consent of a majority. The British Government have since stated that they have no strategic or political interest in their presence in Northern Ireland. The problem therefore can and must be peacefully resolved.

In view of the fact that Ireland has for long been a model member of the international community, it is difficult perhaps for us to appreciate that we could be seriously regarded as posing a threat to anyone. However, I would like to give an

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undertaking that any agreement that is reached between the two Governments and the political parties in the North of Ireland could be put in a referendum to the people both North and South at the same time. In that way all the people of this island would be given the opportunity to pronounce simultaneously, for the first time since 1918, on the form that future relationships might take on this island. Such a mandate would provide a conclusive endorsement of the peaceful, democratic approach so earnestly desired and supported by the vast majority of the Irish people.

Wolfe Tone lived at a time, when the vast majority of the Irish people lived at or below subsistence level. They were people without rights and without property. Half a century later, the population would be decimated by famine and emigration, a catastrophic event that left an indelible mark on the folk memory and on the future course of Irish history. From it arose the determination to end injustice and to gain control of our own destiny.

Despite all the advances in technology and wealth, poverty and famine still persist over large areas of our planet. As a nation, that despite all our current problems has gained a measure of prosperity, and that belongs today to the developed world, we have obligations to those peoples much less fortunate than ourselves. The Irish people have again and again shown a generosity second to none, when it comes to sending help to cope with famine and disaster through individual contributions to our magnificent voluntary organisations.

In the late 1980s the Government cut back overall public expenditure by a quarter, as a necessity to establish sound economic foundations, which have served us well in protecting our economic independence in recent weeks. In this process our bilateral aid programme was kept intact, albeit at a somewhat reduced level. Nevertheless, the Government have readily responded with additional help to meet particular disasters..

Since I became Taoiseach, I have decided to review the level of Official Development Assistance, given by Ireland, recognizing a general wish that it should be increased to reflect the strong sense of solidarity and of moral obligation that we feel towards those in the developing world. We will therefore from next year gradually begin to raise the level of Official Development Assistance, and will hope to be able to proceed somewhat faster thereafter, as general economic and financial conditions improve.

Two hundred years ago, the Belfast Harp Festival in 1792, organized by some of Tone's friends, began the revival of interest in traditional Irish music, another example of the contribution each tradition has made to fostering our ancient Irish culture. For the occasion, Tone wrote a ballad which included the following lines about Ireland and its music:

Her harp then delighted the nations around
By its music entranced, their own sufferings were drown'd
In arts and in learning the foremost were we
And Ireland united was happy and free.

.... Then let us remember our madness no more,
What we lost by division, let union restore ...

For our generation the primary task must be to establish a better mutual understanding and to foster the habits of cooperation, retaining as our final goal the unity of all the people on this island.

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