

6360

**VITAL VOICES CONFERENCE: 31 AUGUST 1998****ADDRESS BY MR DAVID TRIMBLE**

Ambassador Lader, Ambassador Sherman, Lord Mayor, Minister Wallace, Secretary of State, ladies and gentlemen, I have much pleasure in addressing you this afternoon, on the occasion of the opening plenary session of this important conference.

This is a slightly different audience to that which greeted me the last time I stood on this Waterfront stage. Then John Hume and I were interrupting the Bono/Ash rock concert organised in support of the Belfast Agreement.

The recent slaughter of so many innocent children, women and men provide a grim counterpoint to the hopes expressed then. But this is not a community in despair. Despite many atrocities over the past 30 years, our people have not lost faith in themselves or the future. As we saw among the bereaved and injured at Omagh and the doctors, nurses, and others who helped them, these evil atrocities have a way of bringing out the best in so many people. And acts, which were intended to divide and

destroy, have in fact united communities and strengthened that solidarity that has been a feature of civil society here.

Many of the mothers, wives and daughters of Northern Ireland have been tenacious voices for peace, and it is fitting that this conference recognises just how vital those voices can be in building a Northern Ireland at ease with itself. Even during the darkest of days, there has been a civility between the communities and a belief that goodness would triumph over evil. Many women contributed to keeping this civility and goodness to the fore.

This conference takes place at a unique time in the history of Northern Ireland. The men of violence, despite their brutality have failed to extinguish hope. Instead, by far the greater number of our community are strengthened in their resolve to see that terrorism fails and that the godfathers of violence are consigned to the rubbish bin of history. It is the terrorists' realisation that his violence is futile and counterproductive politically that has led one such group after another to change its approach. The Provisional IRA coined the acronym TUAS - tactical use of armed struggle - to describe the change in its approach. I must say to

~~should not only be a new source of information but also a source of information~~

to this simple requirement, will not find anyone ready to listen to their excuses. They have had more than enough time. Now they must deliver. It is simply not good enough that the Republican movement should this morning expressly refuse to say that the war is over and that they are refusing to meet their obligations under the Agreement.

This is not to say that those with a terrible past cannot have a better future. The Agreement provides an opportunity for those previously involved in paramilitary related activities to reconstruct themselves. This is a particularly challenging time for the relatives of the victims of violence, many of whom are women and for those who have struggled to uphold justice. It is vital that their voices too are heard. It is not a matter

of forgiving and forgetting. This is being done on the basis that there will be a real change on the part of those who have been involved in violence.

The Agreement does provide an historic and honourable opportunity for everyone in Northern Ireland. Not to have grasped this opportunity would have been irresponsible, and would have sabotaged the hopes of so many. In a matter of months all sections of our community, except those who chose to exclude themselves, will have the opportunity to put in place accountable democracy. With the 'consent principle' universally accepted and having settled constitutional issues on that basis, we can now move away from a communal divide based on nationality and identity and engage in 'real politics'.

I want the Northern Ireland Assembly to transform the nature of local politics. I want to strengthen and deepen local democracy and, in particular, I want to ensure that all sections of our community have the opportunity to play a full part in taking responsibility for creating a new form of local governance. The needs, concerns, the energies, the visions and ideas of Northern Ireland's women are vitally important to this task. I believe that the local community will respond enthusiastically to this opportunity. I hope that those with responsibility nationally to see that

the people of Northern Ireland have available to them the full range of political opportunities, discharge those obligations.

One immediate issue of gender access is that of the serious under-representation of women in public life in Northern Ireland. The Agreement provides opportunities not only to reshape public administration in ways that will not only command greater public confidence, but also broaden participation. The range of workshops at this conference provides participants with an important forum for exchanging ideas, learning new skills, and gaining the confidence to participate fully in public life.

That only 14 of the 108 Assembly members are women is clearly less than satisfactory. I think all political parties in Northern Ireland are aware of the need to address this 'gender deficit'. It has, unfortunately been a persistent feature of public life in Northern Ireland.

When our first devolved legislature met in 1921 there were only two women present out of the 52 members. I am happy to say that both were Ulster Unionists, Julia McMordie and Dehra Chichester. The latter as Dame Dehra Parker was the only Ulster women this century to hold

government office, as Stormont Minister of Health and Local Government, until Kate Hoey was appointed a junior Home Office minister in the summer reshuffle.

These two first MPs were followed by a further 8 Stormont MPs and three Westminster women members. But with the exception of Bernadette Devlin they were all drawn from the middle classes. But at the beginning of the troubles the middle classes largely withdrew from representation politics and this naturally had an effect on the number of women who involved themselves in electoral politics. That gap was to some extent filled by the increased numbers of appointed public bodies (QUANGOs). But such bodies lack the representational character, the authority and accountability that only comes from the ballot box. Many women here are active in Quangos. Without wanting in any way to understate the contributions made through such channels, may I say that I hope that you will not see such bodies as the best way forward? That best way can only be through direct participation in political life

This is a time for imagination and political courage. The overwhelming majority of unionists have a pluralist and self-confident vision of unionism. Our aim in the talks process has been to create a Pluralist

**Parliament for a Pluralist People.** Our objectives have been to seek a new accommodation of peaceful co-existence and mutual respect with constitutional nationalists and unarmed republicans. The Belfast Agreement provides for unionists and nationalists to live in peace and strive for prosperity.

The strength of unionism is in the quality of our argument, and the attraction of the pluralist vision that we convey. The Agreement is premised on a new form of governance reflecting a new set of realities.

\* the United Kingdom itself is evolving with the new devolved arrangements envisaged for Scotland and Wales.

\* the dropping of the Republic's territorial claim to Northern Ireland makes possible a new relationship.

Under the terms of Agreement the North-South Ministerial Council and the British-Irish Council will shortly give institutional expression to these new realities and will also serve to encompass the new vision of unionism.

I am grateful for the opportunity to address you today. I look forward to seeing you at the reception tomorrow evening which Mr Mallon and I are hosting in Parliament Buildings. I wish you a stimulating, enjoyable and productive conference and I shall be keen to consider all practical suggestions for ensuring that the new era of politics in Northern Ireland maximises the contribution of women.