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EMBARGOED UNTIL 5.45PM

Speech by the Taoiseach, Mr. John Bruton, T.D.,

at the Meath Association of London Dinner

in the Copthorne Tara Hotel

on 11 November, 1995 at 8.00pm

Since I came to office as Taoiseach, Prime Minister John Major and I have worked closely together in advancing the peace process. I believe that the Prime Minister is genuinely engaged, and has a real interest in securing a lasting solution to the problems of Northern Ireland, which have bedevilled relations between our two countries for most of this century.

I have, however, to say tonight, that at this critical juncture, the support of the British Government for a reasonable compromise on the remaining issues in the way of all party talks is now needed to move the process forward.

For 15 months now the guns have been silent. Sinn Fein, a nationalist party which previously supported the strategy of a "ballot box in one hand and an armalite in the other" - has now in two solemn declarations with my Government, committed itself to peaceful and democratic politics, and a peaceful resolution of the problems of Northern Ireland.

However painful, it is now the time for the antagonisms and conflicts of the past to be put aside, in the interests of building a better future for all.

The dead, the injured, and the hurts most grievously suffered by very many people, both unionist and nationalist, need not be forgotten. Rather they should serve as a warning of the kind of society which must never return again. There may even be a role for a "healing forum" where the evils of the past can be exposed and expurgated, like those held in South Africa and South America.

But now, we must focus on the next step, when nationalists and unionists can sit down together to begin the process of negotiating that better future.

It is within reach - but it will not come easily. It will require an effort of will, courage and imagination on all sides.

There is a formula at hand, in the twin track approach.

Through the work of the international body, reassurance can be given on the issue of arms, building trust that they will never again be used, or their use threatened for political purposes.

At the same time the political track can be used to prepare for all party roundtable talks within a speedy timetable.

To the British Government, and to the Unionist community in Northern Ireland, I say that it is reasonable now to seek to, at last, begin the dialogue - on a clear Three Stranded basis - between all the parties.

It is only through dialogue between old antagonists that we will really begin to build a new era of trust and co-operation. The international body will be there

to provide reassurance on the basis of authoritative statements delivered before it - that there is not, and cannot be, a gun under the table.

It is time to take the next step for peace.

Let me set the peace process in a personal and political context. The failure to reach a constructive understanding and accommodation between nationalism and unionism in Ireland has inhibited the economic, cultural and political development of the entire island of Ireland over the past 150 years of conflict between the two ideologies. Over that period, the two ideologies have failed to engage one another seriously. Each has tended to regard the other as an ailment from which their antagonist ought to be cured, rather than as a genuine belief system, sincerely held and with a real intellectual foundation. Over 150 years, nationalists and unionists in Ireland have tended to talk past one another, rather than to one another.

The originality of the present peace process, - something that owes much to John Hume's European perspective - is that we are now working towards a transcendent agreement between the two belief systems, rather than towards the victory of one belief system over the other. In that sense, we are attempting, in

the current peace process, something that has never been systematically attempted by Irish nationalists before - the reaching of an agreement with Irish unionists in Ireland.

For such an agreement to be reached, it is obvious, as I have said elsewhere, that bridges must be built between the two belief systems. And bridgebuilders need to understand the terrain on both sides of the divide. In that context I have personally over the past four or five years, whether in Government or in Opposition, sought to understand the concerns and fears of unionists and ensure that they are given a fair hearing within what might broadly be described as the Irish nationalist community. This has been a difficult, sometimes misrepresented task, but it has had to be done, and must continue to be done.

I recognise, however, that there is another different, equally valuable and essential role that must also be performed. This is the clear and truthful articulation of long held nationalist concerns, by nationalists themselves and, on their behalf. The Irish Government must perform this role, in conjunction with its role of building a bridge between the two belief systems.

Since the foundation of the State, successive Irish Governments have sought to articulate, clearly and truthfully, the legitimate concerns and aspirations long held by nationalists. The continuation of this role is, I believe, a valid and essential contribution to an honest peace process.

Under the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 the Irish Government has a specific and treaty-recognised, role of making sure that nationalists' concerns are heard by the British Government and mediated with that Government through the Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Conference. Nationalists need this Irish Government involvement, because they constitute a substantial community which does not have the same national identity as the unionist community. The present Government, like its predecessor, takes this role very seriously. We want to build bridges, but we will also ensure that nationalist concerns are heard and understood.

Let me now put some of those concerns on record.

The concerns of the nationalist community are both practical and symbolic.

Oaths, flags, emblems and other symbolic issues may not affect the material side of people's lives, but they do affect, either favourably or unfavourably, the

dignity of the nationalist community. And without a respect for dignity, material and practical advances are devalued. The in-built symbolism of the present Governmental arrangements in Northern Ireland is inherently adverse in its effects on the dignity of nationalists and of nationalism. Some progress has been made in changing this, for example the recent decision on oaths, but the progress has been painfully slow - even under direct rule.

The attitude towards the use of the Irish language, the flying of the Union flag in a provocative or excessive manner, the design of official publications are all examples of ways in which the Northern Ireland official system fails to give adequate recognition to the existence and legitimacy of Irish nationalism as an inherent part of Northern life. This can and must be rectified, and it can be done without undermining the necessary recognition of the unionism in Northern life.

Symbolism also has a wider connotation. It extends to the way in which responsibility for recent historic events has been symbolically accepted, or has not been accepted.

There have been calls, which I do not regard as particularly productive, for apologies for historic events of six generations ago. But there is sometimes a genuine need for all sides to accept responsibility for more recent historic events. In the case of comparatively recent and verifiable injustices, if responsibility is not accepted, if no expression of regret of some kind is made, then those past injustices will continue to live on, in a form of half-life, that prevents reconciliation between the protagonists, or even between the children of protagonists. Paramilitary organisations must accept that part of their contribution to complete reconciliation will involve the expression of regret to victims. But this is not confined to paramilitaries.

It is true, for example, of events that took place in Derry in 1968, 1969 and in the early 1970's, involving the security forces. The absence of any adequate official expression of regret for some of those events certainly does distort present day attitudes. It makes it much more difficult for present day issues, like arms decommissioning, to be dealt with in a way that will satisfy all.

There is an inhibition arising from the feeling that one side is being asked to accept a moral responsibility, through decommissioning, for what it has done, while officialdom is not willing to accept a moral responsibility for injustices for which its forces may have been responsible.

That sort of feeling is not confined to Ireland. One has only to look at the brittleness of relationships between certain European and Asian states, in regard to matters that occurred during the last war, to understand how a failure by one side to accept responsibility for past events can undermine present day relationships. This problem has to be addressed in Northern Ireland, and everyone, including the British Government, has a role to play.

Issues of symbolism, and of interpretations of past events, also bedevil the issue of policing in nationalist communities in Northern Ireland. There is a willingness to recognise the professionalism of the police in Northern Ireland. But unionists need to understand that failure by them to accept that police powers were misused during Stormont rule, reduces the effectiveness of the RUC in nationalist areas right up to the present time. This is not a matter that individual RUC officers or their management can overcome. It is something that the unionist representatives can help overcome, by coming to terms with the negative aspects of some of their predecessors' past dealings with their nationalist neighbours - especially in the area of policing. There must be a willingness to look at new approaches for the police service, so that the police service will be seen to belong to the whole community.

There is another way in which the entire unionist community can show that it accepts that it shares the place in which it lives with another community, an Irish nationalist community. This is in the management, scale and frequency of Orange Order parades during the summer months. Parades by the Orange Order and other similar bodies in Northern Ireland are seen by nationalists as an expression of political supremacy. They are seen as the marking out of dominance over a piece of territory, and over all the people who live on that territory - whether they be unionist or nationalist.

Of course, there is no question but that there is a right to march , a right to demonstrate. But it is not compulsory to exercise a right just because one has it. And with every right, there goes a responsibility. If the objective of unionism is to widen its appeal, as is now being stressed by some modernising unionists, how is that objective served by Orange parades undertaken in a triumphant manner? Such parades do not unify the people of Northern Ireland. They divide them. These parades provoke division, and that is the antithesis of unionism, in the literal meaning of that term - an inclusive ideology seeking wide allegiance. If parades are, on the contrary, undertaken to celebrate in a

non threatening way, a proud tradition, they can proceed in a neutral celebratory fashion that can be appreciated by all, but that is not yet the case.

Both nationalism and unionism, in their original meanings, are indeed non-sectarian belief systems. Both are intended to encompass the whole community. Both are intended to do so by winning voluntary allegiance.

Therefore, nationalists and unionists, sitting together in all party talks, should be able to work out a form of Government, that expresses the idea of unifying people that is at the heart of both belief systems, and gives it an agreed institutional form. This institutional form, I believe, will involve an internal dimension, a North-South dimension and an East-West dimension. In any event it is only when unionists and nationalists are sitting together around the same table, that they will admit to past mistakes and make concessions to one another. That is why it is so important to get talks started soon.

The obstacles currently in the way of the start of such all-party talks are comparatively minor in historical terms. When looked at in the broad context of all the matters that have divided us over the three hundred and fifty years

since the Ulster Plantation, the matters still in contention, and separating us from all-party talks, are insignificant.

If we fail to resolve these small contentions, the verdict of future generations will not be favourable for any of us who are involved. In saying that, I realise that, for talks to be fruitful, we must have all the relevant parties at the table. Indeed a formula for talks that attracts one set of parties, by repelling another set of parties, is not a formula for progress. Each side has a responsibility for that.

I also recognise that the talks may take quite a long time. But the issues that are now stopping us from starting the talks are small, and, in historical terms little more than semantic. The Irish Government has put forward fair, firm and reasonable proposals to move towards talks. We are ready to move forward now.

The Irish Government has accepted the word of Sinn Féin on the IRA's commitment to the ceasefire. We have taken that to mean that the ceasefire is not a tactic, but a permanent political commitment.

On that basis, we have brought Sinn Fein into full, close and ongoing dialogue at the highest political level. We have also adopted a policy of early release of republican prisoners. Thirty-six prisoners have been released. That response to the ceasefire by the Irish Government has not been fully matched in Britain or Northern Ireland. I have raised my concern about this matter here on several occasions, and will continue to do so.

The state of emergency in Ireland has been lifted and legislation has been enacted to facilitate the transfer of prisoners from British to Irish jails. We have taken steps designed to ensure that the welfare of republican prisoners in British jails is dealt with as fully and as sympathetically as possible. In this connection it is appropriate that I should say a special thank you to the personnel of the Irish Embassy here in London who have been so active in dealing with this problem in a sensitive and sympathetic way.

My colleagues in Government and I are then seeking politically to anchor a peace which we have now enjoyed for over 15 months.

I have, in recent days, put, on behalf of the Irish Government, specific proposals to the British Prime Minister, John Major, designed to break the logjam in moving to round table talks. I believe that these are reasonable proposals to which all could consent even if they are not their preferred solution. I believe they deserve a constructive response from all for that reason. I recognise they may create difficulties for some because they are not preferred solutions. But unless we compromise from those preferred positions we will not get around the table at all.

When we do get around the table, I have no doubt but that the discussions will be difficult. The enormity of the task has been demonstrated by the fact that so many generations before us have not succeeded in reconciling the two belief systems on our island. Let us not be deterred by the history of failure. There is a new spirit in Ireland. Many people have taken generous and courageous steps.

Let us hope that this generosity and courage will shortly be matched by a generous, courageous and decisive response on this side of the water.