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**FIANNA FÁIL**
THE REPUBLICAN PARTYFao
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SPEECH BY MR. BERTIE AHERN T.D., LEADER OF FIANNA FÁIL AT A MEETING IN BELFAST, ORGANISED BY THE CAMPAIGN FOR DEMOCRACY ON BREAKING THE STALEMATE, DUKES HOTEL, BELFAST, MONDAY, 24 FEBRUARY 1997 AT 7.30 PM.

I am glad to have this opportunity of coming to Belfast to discuss the challenge of Breaking the Stalemate. We all desire to create a peaceful and progressive future, despite the many serious and disappointing setbacks that there have been in recent months. The policy statement issued by the Campaign for Democracy organising this meeting encapsulates exactly what Fianna Fáil would be trying to achieve at the present time, in terms of defusing conflict, and trying to find a balanced political accommodation.

I would like to thank Kevin McCorry for bringing together on one platform the three parties, North and South, primarily responsible for the joint Irish peace initiative that brought about the IRA ceasefire of August 1994, which was followed by the Loyalist ceasefire. It reminds us of what we have lost.

My presence here tonight with Denis Haughey of the SDLP and Mitchel McLaughlin of Sinn Féin is a sign of my determination on return to Government, to do all in my power to restore confidence in the peace process and bring back peace, and to see violence banished for good. Provided I am sure that there is genuine intent, I am still ready to renew the shared commitment to peace and democracy that was sealed by a handshake on the steps of Government Buildings by Albert Reynolds, John Hume and Gerry Adams on 6 September 1994. As the experience of the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation in Dublin showed, the potential exists to build a democratic consensus for progress that goes far wider than any purely Nationalist consensus. The Alliance Party and many of the smaller parties also share similar ideas to ourselves on the likely shape of future relationships on this island and on what is feasible and desirable in the short to medium term. In my own Dublin Central constituency, we have many of the same problems of unemployment, and crime that face working-class communities in Belfast. We can learn from each other, and help each other, while allowing everyone the political space that they need. My whole political career has been about bridging threatening gaps, that can be narrow but deep at the same time.

Successive British Prime Ministers have had no difficulty about meeting the two Unionist leaders together, when they have so requested. Once a durable ceasefire is back in place, I will not make any difficulty about meeting together with the leaders of Northern Nationalism, if and when they so desire. But in neither the British nor my own case would it mean a closed door to others. Just as Downing Street is open to the SDLP and Alliance leaders, so the Taoiseach's Office or indeed any other convenient venue ought to be available to meet the leaders of any of the Northern parties, Alliance, Unionists, Loyalists and Women's Coalition, and other leaders of the community. Successive Irish Governments have always practised an open-door policy, except to parties associated with campaigns of violence. I support that policy reserve, because it must be clearly understood and visible to all sections of the community in Northern Ireland, that no Irish Government will have anything to do with advancing political aims by violence.

While we must all look positively to the future, I cannot hide the deep disappointment in my party at the continued breakdown of the peace process. Up to last February, considerable progress was being made on many fronts, despite the difficulties, the obstruction and the bad faith. The peace process had real and tangible benefits for all the people of Northern Ireland, and huge further potential. There was nothing phoney about the fact that people were no longer being killed, or about the new optimism on the streets or in the Northern Ireland economy. While the opportunity was badly mishandled by the British Government, in particular, I and most other people in the South, like no doubt the vast majority of people in the North, also felt badly let down by the abandonment of the IRA ceasefire. This point of view was forcefully expressed by John Hume in the Irish News last week. I know that President Clinton and influential friends of Ireland in America feel exactly the same way. Quite apart from the original IRA ceasefire statement, solemn statements were made with John Hume and successive Taoisigh by the Sinn Féin leadership, expressing an absolute commitment to peace and exclusively democratic solutions. Some of those statements were made long after political difficulties had arisen with the British Government. As a result of what has happened, serious damage has been done to trust, not least with fellow-Nationalists, who were willing to do their utmost to make the new initiative work, and who fulfilled all the public promises within their power.

The Republican Movement needs to address seriously without waiting any longer how it rebuilds peace and restores trust. The onus for building peace rests with everyone, including them. The entire responsibility cannot be shifted onto someone else. Failures by the British Government are no excuse for the continuation of an IRA campaign, which is rejected by the overwhelming majority of both the Irish people in general and Irish Nationalists in particular. Increasing political isolation and loss of influence is the inevitable prospect facing Sinn Féin, if the IRA insist on going their own way to nowhere, refuse to listen to others, and damage the interests and the safety of all who live on this island. I am sorry that is so, because as leader of the mainstream Republican party in this country true Republican values mean a

great deal to me. I would like to see more visible signs of a political leadership that is spelling out the realities of the situation to those engaged in IRA activity, even though I understand the difficulties. Any new ceasefire, if it is to work, must be for real, not a sham, and it cannot be conditional or tactical.

The basis on which we are all here is that continued violence is not the way forward. It is not the answer to anything. At the same time, we need to persuade, not just lecture in a one-sided way or engage in elaborate self-justification. Our main eye needs to be on peace not on our own electorate. We are all impatient for a new era, in which a more constructive politics is possible, and in which the spotlight is thrown where it belongs, on those who are stuck in old attitudes that are blocking progress and reconciliation.

I belong to a political movement that was born out of the losing side of a disastrous civil war. Nowhere were its effects more disastrous than here in the North, where it left the Nationalist community without effective support of any kind. In 1922-3, Republicans had just as many legitimate and deeply felt grievances against both the British Government and the Free State. But once they committed themselves to accepting the democratic process, and built up a new political movement, they never looked back. Northern Republicans today have the same choice and the same leap of faith to make, in a situation where they so far have not had to face defeat. What will not work is an in-between approach, on-off violence as an à la carte option, to be resorted to, whenever difficulties or blockages arise in the peace process. No constructive alliances or trust can be built on the basis of a double strategy. I welcome Gerry Adams' willingness to commit his party to the Mitchell Principles, but it is time to match action and words. He may say that Sinn Fein does not speak for the IRA, but everyone needs to understand that participants in talks, Loyalist and Republican, Unionist and Nationalist, make themselves responsible under the Mitchell Principles for the behaviour of those associated with them. That accountability has to be accepted by all.

I am confident that all political difficulties or obstructions that arise can be tackled by political means. Democratic politics can at times be a tedious, frustrating and disappointing business. But it is an honourable profession. The SDLP have operated successfully on that basis for over 20 years. John Hume enjoys the respect of the world, and has an influence second to none.

The Irish Government and other Irish parties, in addition to repudiating violence must also try to give the Republican Movement the confidence to take the final irrevocable step. This was the essence of John Hume's approach, as it was of Albert Reynolds'. When I met Tony Blair before Christmas, he told me that, if the Republican Movement want peace, he will facilitate them. I am assured that under the Ground Rules document the British Government no longer have the power to bloc access to talks to any party that has renounced violence, even if other parties were to walk out in protest. The difference standing in the way of a renewed ceasefire is on the face of it small enough, and could be bridged. It is an assurance that inclusive and substantive talks will start within a short, specified period of time. I would urge the British Government, as in 1994, to give any clarification of its position that is necessary to clear up misunderstanding and allay suspicion. That assurance should be given. But even if this doesn't happen, I am sure that Fianna Fáil, the SDLP and the Irish Government, and I hope others, would insist on implementation of the Ground Rules following a proper ceasefire. The difficulty will then be the unwillingness of some of the Unionist Parties to negotiate with Sinn Féin, or to acknowledge the electoral mandate given by up to 15% of the people, which cannot be ignored. But IRA actions will not force anyone to the negotiating table. Nor is it possible to demand guarantees in advance that all parties will be constructive and reasonable. Only political persuasion and pressure from the people can achieve that.

Both Governments have to take a broad, long-term view that comprehends and upholds the legitimate and vital interests of all sections. They cannot be the prisoners of either community, or become the instruments to oppress one community

at the behest of the other. The British Government has responsibilities towards the Nationalist community, just as the Irish Government have responsibilities towards the Unionist community. The British Government, which claims exclusive sovereignty over Northern Ireland, has accepted the duty to exercise 'rigorous impartiality' in its administration of Northern Ireland, as promised in the Framework Document. That is an ideal that still has to become a full reality. The principle of consent, which both Governments accept and defend, provides all the necessary reassurance that the people of Northern Ireland will not be coerced into a united Ireland or some other constitutional half-way house against their will. But, unfortunately, and this was the fundamental flaw from the beginning of the Partition Act of 1920 and the Treaty Settlement, Northern Nationalists have never enjoyed any such guarantee of freedom from coercion. A purely one-sided application of the principle of consent will never underpin constitutional stability. Unionists can only achieve political security and stability, if they go out and win the consent of Nationalists to a new dispensation, which does justice to all the relationships.

For 75 years, Northern Nationalists have been asked to accept a position that Unionists vowed they would never accept themselves. For well over a century, Unionists have said that they would go to any lengths to prevent their forced incorporation into a self-governing Ireland in which they would be a minority, even if laid down by an Act of the British Parliament. It is still their stated determination today. We have no reason to disbelieve them. But the same arguments that are valid for Unionists hold equally for Nationalists. If majoritarianism will not work in an all-Ireland context, it will not work in a Northern Ireland one either, and that is clearly acknowledged in paragraph 5 of the Downing Street Declaration.

Northern Ireland's frontiers as decided in 1920 incorporated a large Nationalist minority. They need not have done so, but that is now history. But wherever the border was drawn, it would have left a lot of people on the wrong side of it, and it could have hardly made much difference to Nationalists living in Belfast, who would have remained under any boundary award within a Northern Ireland jurisdiction.

The people in Northern Ireland have had a separate history, for better or for worse, for over 75 years. They are entitled to decide their future, as between continued membership of the United Kingdom, or joining a united Ireland, as a unit. In either case, of course, they need a willing partner, in Britain or in the rest of Ireland. But in any circumstances, the two communities, and those who are in between, have to decide how to organise their future and their relationships in partnership. The meaning of the Framework Document is that both the British and Irish Governments are saying to the community which identifies most closely with them, that a new agreed set of relationships must be found. It is fundamentally illusory for Unionists to believe that, provided they can keep the British Government under their thumb, they can keep Nationalists at bay, on the outside. The crude concept of democracy as majority rule is fundamentally invalid in a divided community. People like Bob McCartney, who should know better, still speak, as if majority rule, meaning winner takes all, is all that there is to democracy in Northern Ireland. Ulster is manifestly not exclusively British. It is equally illusory to suppose that a pan-Nationalist Front with American backing can overwhelm the British Government and the Unionist community, and reduce the latter to the status of a national minority on the island of Ireland. One side cannot dictate to the other, and it is continuing attempts to do so that are responsible for many of the difficulties and tensions.

The British people no more want a Northern Ireland governed in accordance with the spirit of Drumcree, with both communities driven to ruinous confrontation on the streets, than a stable and increasingly prosperous Republic wants to incorporate a Northern Ireland with a Unionist community in open revolt. How much longer will it take before we all recognise that, in Sir Horace Plunkett's memorable phrase, 'government with the dissent of the governed' does not work and will never work ?

In terms of population, we are now approaching near equality between the communities. That reality is masked somewhat at Westminster by the effects of a very one-sided electoral system of first past the post. I am glad to see the Belfast

Telegraph ten days ago echoing John Hume's call for PR to be used in all elections in the North. It would avoid the pressure on either side for electoral pacts that are less than ideal from a democratic point of view, and allow the people's preferences to be accurately reflected in detail. That is an issue that should be taken up with the next British Government. Near parity between the communities is also masked by the continuing absence of Sinn Féin from the mainstream political process, because of continuing violence. Once that ends, it is an illusion to suppose that any party with an electoral mandate of up to 15% of the population can be permanently frozen out of the political process for good. Trying to build stability by political exclusion is a totally futile undertaking.

If peace is to be consolidated, we have to be prepared to learn from the mistakes made during the 17 month IRA ceasefire and from experience elsewhere. We need a greater sense of realism on all sides. The problem, which is evident, for example, in relation to marches, is the very wide gap between each community's sense of what would represent a reasonable compromise. That probably comes from the fact that they do not talk nearly enough to each other. While I broadly support the North Commission proposals, legislation should put more emphasis on the respect for minority rights that should characterise any pluralist society. Where one route causes trouble, and another of equal length to and from the same points causes little or none, common sense tells us which route should be used.

I find attitudes so far deeply disappointing. Can no lessons be learnt from a confrontation that caused millions of pounds of damage to the Northern economy, and that heightened sectarian tensions to dangerous levels? I would like to see a new spirit in Unionism that respects pluralism, that respects minority rights, instead of feeling that it has to trample all over them, and that is prepared to adopt basic common sense. Unionists complain that Sinn Féin have not accepted the principle of consent. Let them show in Portadown that the Orangemen understand and accept the principle of consent.

I have given leadership on the principle of consent in recent years, and led my party forward. I challenge Mr. Trimble to show the same leadership. No Church should be turned into a battleground. But equally I would appeal to Nationalists not to react in a sectarian way.

The decision to call an unconditional ceasefire was based on the firm, public understanding that a complete renunciation of violence would be followed soon by participation in talks. There were many other positive developments during the 17 month period, the meetings of the Peace Forum in Dublin, the release of prisoners from jails in the Republic, and an upsurge in economic activity, some of which continues to be felt even in West Belfast. My party would still like to see, in solid conditions of peace, the whole prisoner issue resolved by the turn of the century, barring those guilty of the worst crimes, while giving greater support to the victims. For that to be possible, we have to be absolutely satisfied that paramilitary activity is over for good. Prior to the ceasefire, the two Governments held out a prospect of inclusive all-party talks, but over a 17 month period and especially over the twelve months following the publication of the Framework Document they failed to deliver, until much too late. The British Government simply failed to fulfil their promised side of the bargain, mainly no doubt because of the situation at Westminster. On the Irish side, the situation was complicated by a change of Government, which also had nothing to do with the good of a two and a half month old ceasefire.

When Fianna Fáil were in Government, we were promised publicly a ceasefire that would hold in all circumstances. We had sought to provide the opportunity of an honourable end to the conflict, which should not have been revisited. But it must be admitted that the political failure to organise talks over 17 months put a delicate peace process under immense and unnecessary strain. Many of you will have heard in Belfast last June the General Secretary of the ANC state that : 'Had the negotiations in our situation not started when the ANC suspended armed action, the ANC would have gone back to armed action'. That is no justification for what

happened in the circumstances of Northern Ireland. But this time, a proper end to conflict must be followed swiftly by inclusive and serious political talks.

Similarly, the General Secretary of the ANC told us that 'had the National Party insisted that the weapons should be handed over, there would never have been a settlement It was agreed that when we reached a final settlement, then the ANC would hand over the arms, where there would be joint controls and mechanisms put in place that would deal with the problem'. I fully accept that neither Republican nor Loyalist organisations have the political support or moral standing of the ANC. Nevertheless, if a Government tries to conduct a peace process in a way that ignores international experience, they cannot be entirely surprised, if it goes wrong. The truth is that, through political incomprehension and expediency, the peace train was driven into the buffers. But it should be clearly understood that the weaponry issue in all its various dimensions will have to be seriously addressed and resolved in the course of talks and that it cannot be evaded. If Republicans and Loyalists adopt the new mindset that a serious commitment to the peace process requires, then this should not be a source of difficulty in the longer term.

The Governments can say in their defence that after the ceasefire broke down they hurried to establish an inclusive talks process based on acceptance of the Mitchell Principles. The Governments can also say with some justification that a date was set for all-party talks last June, in which Sinn Féin could immediately have taken part. We strongly urged that that opportunity should have been taken up. Unfortunately, the talks, even though they have a distinguished chairman in George Mitchell, have, so far, dealt with nothing except decommissioning, and have not engaged in any substantive negotiations. There has been a certain element of marking time, as much for elections, as keeping the door ajar to Sinn Féin. I agree with John Hume that the time for any party to decide whether it is going to be part of a post-election talks process is now. The electorate North and South are entitled to know without ambiguity or equivocation what they are voting for in terms of each Party's responsibility and commitment to peace and democratic involvement, which

does not depend in any way on the actions of others. The people are surely entitled to certainty about the course of action that will be followed after an election and about the good faith of those involved, and whether if they vote for peace they will get peace. Elections are a time to exercise people power. People should demand watertight commitments from those seeking their votes that they and their movements, where relevant, are stopping paramilitary violence for good, before not after the Election; that they are going to work for a reduction in sectarian tensions; that they are going to sit at the table and work out with all other elected parties a balanced political accommodation based on equality, partnership, cooperation and mutual respect. By making those simple demands of all their politicians, the people of Northern Ireland could transform their own situation within the next three months.

The approach of Elections and new Governments in Britain and Ireland offer perhaps a final chance to restore the peace process on its original basis. Confidence-building has to be two-way. I would like to see the British Government adopt a far more enlightened approach to demands for a new enquiry on Bloody Sunday, possible miscarriages of justice in Britain, and the callous conditions of imprisonment of Roisin McAliskey, a pregnant woman. I do not understand how British Home Office Ministers can be so slow and inflexible in acknowledging miscarriages of justice, or how they can tolerate for Irish prisoners vindictive and penal barbarities that are shameful for any country that would pride itself on a decent system of justice. The German Government must act, if the British Government will not.

Equally, I would like to see the IRA halt all further attacks now, including equally barbaric punishment beatings, carried out both by themselves and by Loyalists, and make the declaration of a permanent ceasefire that this time will really be for good. Republicans in my opinion, would be strongly advised to make the best of what is currently on offer, and trust for the rest in the skills of their political leadership and the strong support that they will get from others for the exercise of their basic democratic rights, once violence is renounced. I am not sure that they understand

how much, as things stand at present, their negotiating position is undermined by IRA violence, or that they have left themselves in a position where politically they can be largely ignored. It is a misunderstanding of the situation to be attempting to lay down new preconditions. Their present position is simply not politically tenable.

With or without a new ceasefire I would like to see constitutional Unionists and Nationalists trying seriously to show the way in negotiations on future structures for Northern Ireland and its relationships with the South, that will have some attractions for anyone tempted to stay away from them. I would like to see the Loyalist community show the same responsibility in relation to marches, as it has done, by and large, in refraining from revenge and retaliation for IRA actions, where they have proved that they are not just reactive.

The fundamental understanding in the Downing Street Declaration was that both Governments would push hard for a negotiated agreement. Given a renunciation of violence, negotiations would have to be inclusive. New Governments in Dublin and London must pick up the reins, and drive these negotiations forward under George Mitchell, with US backing.

Peace and stability and a political settlement are vital for the prosperity of Northern Ireland, and important for the prosperity of the whole of Ireland. Day after day, different voices in the business sector spell out the economic cost of the present political instability.

Market forces are driving the two parts of Ireland together against the background of European Union, which positively encourages cross-border activity between member States. My vision for the immediate future is of the two parts of Ireland working closely together in the economic sphere, while respecting their political differences. New relationships in Ireland will evolve out of a changing international background, perhaps with constitutional change within the UK itself and a common European currency. Earlier this afternoon, I launched a policy document on North-

South cooperation in the field of energy, transport and communications, on which I would welcome your views and which will be available afterwards.

The economic gap between North and South is closing rapidly. The nature of society in the South is changing. The communities in Northern Ireland must grow out of the antagonisms of the past, which are holding both of them back. Those who know a better future is possible must speak out, and not accept the backward-looking attitudes that exist on both sides. I believe most political parties in Northern Ireland contain people who genuinely want to create a better future. I look forward to working with all of them, recognising that relationships between North and South are but one dimension of the problem. At the same time, acceptance of a strong and healthy North-South dimension will be the surest sign of acceptance of the Irish identity and its legitimacy within Northern Ireland, in a way consistent with economic self-interest and pragmatism.

Vigorous reform, the tackling of economic and social deprivation, the reintegration of prisoners into the community, and respect for equal rights are also vital for building confidence in Northern Ireland.

All of us like to have pride in our country. The violence of 25 years diminishes our pride. Real peace could do wonders for our self-confidence North and South, allied to the real economic opportunities that are now offered to us in a united Europe.

May I conclude with a quotation from the new American Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright. Addressing Congress on 11 February, she said :

'The great divide in the world today is not between East or West or North and South: it is between those who are the prisoners of history and those determined to shape history'.

I and my party Fianna Fáil are determined to be shapers of history, not prisoners of it. I believe that should also be the ambition of every democrat and every voter in

Northern Ireland.