



# An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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**ADDRESS BY THE TAOISEACH MR. BERTIE AHERN T.D., TO S.T.O.P.  
- THE SOLIDARITY TO ORGANISE PEACE GROUP IN DUBLIN ON  
THURSDAY, 24 JULY, 1997**

Everyone on this island who puts people first will welcome the restoration of the IRA ceasefire. It gives renewed impetus and encouragement to all of us in our search for peace. It is up to all of us to ensure that it is permanent. The basis of peace must be the creation of an inclusive democratic process with equality of treatment and parity of esteem for all sections of the community.

I can understand the difficulties that many Unionists may have in coming to terms immediately with a ceasefire, which has happened unexpectedly as far as they are concerned, but the prospect of peace can surely be welcomed by everyone in Northern Ireland. Everyone needs to examine their basic assumptions about the intentions of others, and to see what they can do to start building mutual confidence. There should be no resentment of the efforts of those of us who have helped to bring the ceasefire about without any sacrifice of democratic principle. The political difficulties that follow are far preferable challenges for politicians to deal with than a succession of coffins, and everyone needs to bear that in mind in the welter of political argument.

The most important task facing the Irish Government now is to bring about a lasting peace in Ireland with justice for every section of the Irish people on this island. I want to help bring about a more positive atmosphere, in which deep political differences no longer provoke violence and no longer stand in the way of constructive co-operation or prevent the development of greater harmony and trust. As indicated in our Programme for Government, our policy will respect and build on the achievements of previous Irish and British Governments, which include in recent years the Downing Street Declaration, and the Joint Framework Document, as well as building upon the inter-party draft Report of the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation. The work of the earlier New Ireland Forum also retains much validity. I hope that after a period for reflection over the summer all parties will find it possible to participate in substantive all-party talks beginning on 15 September, in accordance with what I believe is the majority wish in both communities to confront the difficult political questions.

I recognise the positive contribution made by courageous leadership in the Orange Order after events at Drumree, especially the decision not to march down the Lower Ormeau Road and into the centre of Derry, and so helping to defuse the build-up of dangerous tension and conflict. I also commend the willingness of residents' groups to discuss with the Orange Order local accommodations. I hope that the somewhat better climate that has been created will be used by everyone concerned to bring about an end to all sectarian attacks, including some appalling recent murders. I look forward to the Order's participation in dialogue and discussions that will allow traditions to be honoured and personal freedom to be respected in a peaceful and harmonious manner between the communities. Every political party and section of the community must be prepared to make a constructive contribution to building peace and to make their legitimate demands in a temperate spirit.

Both Governments have to create confidence on all sides that there is a peaceful way forward, and to show patience, understanding and determination in face of the many obstacles to progress. To assist this process, I would like to reiterate some of the important public statements and reassurances given by myself and my predecessors over the past few years.

The aim of the Irish Government, and I believe the present British Government, is a just and lasting settlement, which provides a firm foundation for peace for the people of this island. We will not be deflected from that search, in which everyone must play a constructive part. It is clear that without clear and firm guidance and commitment at Government level there is little real prospect of resolving

the problem. The two Governments have to play a full partnership role. In the face of opposing insecurities, it is particularly important that the British and Irish Governments should give the lead. We need to ensure the momentum of political progress. We must point the way to the new structures that are needed to bring stability, not by ignoring or resisting change, but by finding new ways to accommodate it.

A just and lasting political settlement can best be brought about through inclusive all-party talks, in which every democratic party is fully involved. I would hope that the representatives of the Unionist parties will play their full part in these talks.

We want to ensure that an irrevocable momentum will be built up and sustained so that talks can develop a positive dynamic of their own towards agreement and lasting peace. This happened in South Africa, which very many of the Northern parties visited recently in order to learn from their experience.

We all want to take the gun out of Irish politics for good. Decommissioning is an equally important part of that. We must not allow arguments on how decommissioning is to be achieved to block political progress. The Irish Government stands four-square behind the Mitchell Report, and the decommissioning and clarification documents agreed by the two Governments. They represent a reasonable approach. Democratic Governments have a continuing duty to remove and decommission illegally held weapons. Mutual decommissioning on the other hand on a voluntary basis has self-evidently to be negotiated and agreed, as is clear from Mitchell. Peremptorily demanding it will get nowhere, and at worst end up as before with the very situation that we are trying to avoid. It is time for honesty and realism on this, and for the adoption of a position that is best calculated to genuinely remove the gun and the bomb as a factor in Irish politics for good.

It is the Irish Government's view that a new political dispensation, which can command the allegiance and consent of both main traditions, is essential. The Government of Ireland Act of 1920 and subsequent constitutional development failed to resolve the conflict of political allegiances within Ireland. A deep settlement, incorporating positive elements that have been identified, would address and overcome previous failures going back to 1920, to achieve the basis of a just and durable solution.

The two traditions in Ireland had a quite different experience of the Act of Union. Northern Unionists felt that the Union did bring about political reform, and give them equality of citizenship and economic opportunity. That experience was not shared by Nationalists. Indeed, most Nationalists, particularly after the experience of deindustrialisation in most of Ireland and the Great Famine, eventually came to the conclusion that the only way to guarantee equality of opportunity and of rights was to establish political independence in a separate State.

The New Ireland Forum Report of 1984, subscribed to by the then four main Nationalist parties, stated their belief that unity in agreement achieved peacefully and by consent would offer the best and most durable basis for peace and stability, but that any such structure would have to include irrevocable guarantees for the protection and preservation of both the Unionist and Nationalist identities. It also set out other constitutional options, while remaining open to discuss other views which might contribute to political development.

Consistent with that position, the Irish Government will work for institutional change, and it will seek in co-operation with the British Government and in negotiation with other parties to bring about constitutional change that over the longer term it considers to be essential, on the basis that it can only be achieved in peace, by agreement and consent.

It remains my view, both as Taoiseach and as leader of Fianna Fáil, that in the longer term a united Ireland achieved by agreement still offers the best and most durable basis for peace and stability. But I have to acknowledge, as stated in the Framework Document, that the option of a sovereign united Ireland does not now command the consent of the Unionist tradition, nor does the existing status of Northern Ireland command the consent of the Nationalist tradition. In both cases, actual and hypothetical, such consent is indispensable.

While eventual Irish unity brought about in peace and agreement is the wish of most Irish people at home and abroad, it is up to those of us who want Irish unity to persuade those who do not. That is likely to be a longer term process, and of course in a democratic process no outcome is excluded or predetermined. The basic respect for the main constitutional alternatives in both the Downing Street Declaration and the Framework Document means that many things, including Irish unity, may be possible in our lifetime, and we cannot say with any real certainty whether they will or will not happen. Confidence-building and the creation of trust, as something worthwhile in itself, without prejudice to any longer term constitutional goals on either side, are essential. We recognise the need to consolidate and build constructively on the work done on social, economic and cultural co-operation. Accepting legitimate constitutional differences, it is our commitment to do all that we can to bring closer together the people of this island in a new and agreed Ireland.

In any event, there can be no return to the majoritarian mindset, which caused both abuses and bitterness in the Stormont period, but which also further alienated Unionists from the South. Those who have been badly treated in the past need to be assured that neither selfish strategic considerations on the part of the British Government nor mob rule, intimidation or violence from any quarter will be allowed to upset the free play of democratic forces, as they have done a number of times before. Equally, no Irish Government will attempt on majoritarian principles to impose a united Ireland on a minority in this island against their will.

In our view, the predominantly internal arrangements in the North under majority rule or direct rule have failed to provide a lasting accommodation or stable settlement. The fuller development of this whole island has in many ways been held back. But we have to find a balanced way of reflecting and accommodating the different aspirations and political allegiances of the people, as reflected in their democratically expressed choices. There can be no exclusively internal Northern Ireland settlement, any more than there can be an externally imposed settlement. The basis for negotiations endorsed by both Governments also ensure that there cannot be any narrow focus on an internal settlement in talks, which must broadly reflect the three strands and the totality of relationships.

The Irish Government will be seeking in talks to bring about a substantial and significant reform and improvement in political structures, and to make them more widely acceptable. I am, of course, conscious of the fears and sensitivities of Unionists. The Government fully accepts the need in any situation to recognise that Northern Unionists and Protestants have their own political identity and aspirations, and to protect their civil and religious rights. An urgent priority is to create a greater degree of trust between the two principal traditions. We are fully committed to building an inclusive society on this island based on equality and national reconciliation. If we want to improve the situation, we have to recognise, as Mo Mowlam, now Secretary of State, put it a few months ago, that the status quo is not an option. But if such change is to bring both sides together, change must recognise the legitimacy of each tradition.

All-party talks, to be successful, will need to build a new and agreed relationship of mutual respect and co-operation between them, involving a radical renegotiation on a three-strand basis not just of the Anglo-Irish Agreement but of the 1920-4 Settlement, many of the original intentions of which in terms of North-South relations and non-discrimination were not fulfilled.

The Irish Government will enter negotiations or discussions aiming to tackle, in a constructive and creative way, the root causes of conflict. To Northern Nationalists, I acknowledge that we in the South, no less than others, failed, in our preoccupation in the early decades with the construction of our own State, to give adequate practical, as distinct from rhetorical, attention to the protection of your rights including to the expression of your identity. Political hostility to the Unionist tradition, and policies which sometimes perversely increased rather than allayed their deep historical insecurities, put Northern Nationalists at a further disadvantage, and did not contribute to the development of more harmonious relations between the two parts of the island.

If the future is to be one of peace and hope, there can be no domination of Nationalists by Unionists and equally, none of Unionists by Nationalists. In our view, there is a need for substantial and significant change, in accordance with the principles set out in the Downing Street Declaration and the Joint Framework Document agreed with the British Government. There must be parity of esteem and equality of treatment in all spheres for Northern Nationalists and for Unionists.

In particular, the Government, in preparing for talks, will seek to put more flesh on many of the ideas in the Framework Document, so that concrete proposals can be put forward, that go beyond general principle. Three key areas can be identified, in particular :

- Fulfilment of the equality and other commitments made by the British Government in paragraphs 19 and 20 of the Framework Document: - A more detailed working out of the spheres of operation of North/South institutions as envisaged in paras 24-38 of the Framework Document;
- The engagement of broader constitutional negotiations, on the lines which I have set out, including the need for a new approach to constitutional doctrines on both sides, and significant change in this regard on both sides.

The agreed rules make clear that the negotiations are to address, in a full and comprehensive fashion, all the relevant issues and relationships so that:

- \* each participant in each of the three strands will on an equal basis, be free to raise any aspect of the relevant relationships, including constitutional issues and other matters which it considers relevant and to have their arguments heard and considered;
- \* no outcome is either predetermined or excluded in advance; and
- \* participation in the negotiations is without prejudice to any participant's commitment to the achievement of its own preferred options by exclusively peaceful and democratic means.

Under the agreed rules, no individual party can have a veto over negotiations and discussions.

The two Governments have the responsibility to play a leadership role in the search for a new accommodation, in whatever form it can be best pursued in any given circumstances, subject to democratic validation by way of referendum. The parties must be given every opportunity to shape these matters in an agreed fashion. That is why we have worked so patiently in the negotiations. But we also welcome the firm indications from the British Prime Minister and the will of both Governments expressed in yesterday's joint statement that, in any case, substantive discussions will commence on 15 September.

In the whole sphere of equality, ensuring parity of esteem in regard to the Irish language, Irish culture and Irish identity generally is another area that talks must cover. Policing and the administration of justice are two other critical areas, whose importance to any future accommodation is manifest from analysis and experience alike.

The protection of human rights also calls for attention in the context of an agreed political settlement.

Justice is a vital foundation for peace, and the outcome of talks must ensure that it will be seen to be done. The Irish Government will certainly work actively towards this objective.

The concerns of the Nationalist community are both practical and symbolic. Marches, oaths, flags, emblems and other symbolic issues affect, either favourably or unfavourably, the dignity of the Nationalist community. But the Nationalist tradition in the island must also show reciprocal sensitivity towards the symbols and traditions which Unionists cherish. Without a respect for dignity, material and practical advances are devalued. The in-built symbolism of many of the present Government arrangements in Northern Ireland is inherently adverse in its effects on the dignity of Nationalists and of Nationalism. But again Unionists need to be assured that those entering into negotiations with them appreciate their need to have their symbolism, identity and allegiance given due respect and expression under the arrangements to be agreed. As the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation stated it, agreed arrangements must even-handedly afford both traditions parity of esteem and equality of treatment in all spheres.

In the context of talks it will also be essential that they focus in an imaginative and compassionate way on all the questions relating to those who have been imprisoned in the context of the conflict, both Republican and Loyalist, while also giving full attention to the concerns of victims of violence. The question of prisoners must be addressed in a constructive and generous way. That will be the approach of this Government, returning to the same approach that existed prior to February 1996. All those in this jurisdiction who have been imprisoned in the context of the conflict will benefit from these measures. We will urge the British Government and the authorities in other jurisdictions, where prisoners related to the Irish conflict are held, also to adopt an imaginative and generous approach. We are working intensively with the British Government and will continue to do so on securing the transfer of prisoners, with a particular focus on those who have already served long periods, and we continue to urge that the conditions in which prisoners are held are in accordance with the need for dignity and respect for human rights. We also take encouragement from what was said in the letter from the Northern Ireland Office to Martin McGuinness on 9 July, with regard to the position of prisoners.

Our rejection of renewed acts of paramilitary violence is clear. But it is my judgement and belief that the political leadership of Sinn Féin have shown that they are genuinely and sincerely committed to the peace process and the search for a just and lasting peace in Ireland. I believe the same can be said of the political leadership of the mainstream Loyalist organisations. Restraint on many sides did prevent the North from being plunged back into the levels of violence prior to August 1994. We have enormous respect for parties like the SDLP and Alliance who have always set their face against any form of violence, and we also acknowledge that the Ulster Unionists have worked to maintain peace from within their own community.

On the basis of the IRA cessation of August 1994 having been unequivocally restored, the Irish Government will accord Sinn Féin equal treatment in line with that accorded other parties, both in terms of access to Government and insistence on non-discrimination in the talks process or the wider political sphere.

As Taoiseach, I will consult regularly with all shades of Northern political opinion, to consolidate democratic consensus around a peaceful way forward, and thus to ensure a high degree of agreement and continuity on this issue between successive Governments, in a similar way to what we have achieved through social partnership in the economic sphere. I will establish, in consultation with other parties, a mechanism or committee, involving the Government and Northern parties wishing to participate, to review regularly means of achieving progress. I am also prepared to consider the

possibility of reconvening the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation on an occasional basis, depending on the wishes of other parties.

People would like the United States to be guarantors of fair play. A close working relationship with the United States Administration, Congress, US corporations and institutions and the goodwill inherent in Irish America will be central to much of what we do. The European Union also provides a supportive framework for co-operation, reconstruction and reconciliation.

As Taoiseach, therefore, my main priorities are the following :

- the consolidation of peace in Northern Ireland;
- working closely on this with the new British Government;
- achieving the widest possible democratic consensus, including both Nationalists and others, on the way forward,
- and creating a new understanding with Unionists.

**ENDS**