

Northern Ireland - A Time of Hope¹

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Introduction

I expect that you will want me to talk about recent developments in Ireland. I am very happy to do so, all the more because, for the first time in more than a generation, my message is one of hope. There is an opportunity now available which, if seized, with courage and determination, can transform the situation in Northern Ireland and set the whole island firmly on course towards lasting peace and stability.

My hopes are based on two related developments: In December (1993) the British and Irish governments signed a Joint Declaration which was a significant milestone on the road to an accommodation of the problem (Appendix 1). Last August the IRA decided upon a complete cessation of military operations, and crucially, this decision has been fully sustained on the ground since then. (Appendix 2).

Both developments, in their different ways, are a response to an insistent and heartfelt desire for an end to violence which is palpable as never before across the entire spectrum of the population in Ireland. Taken together they create a new political opportunity that it is vital to turn to good account.

The violence which has taken such a terrible human and material toll in Northern Ireland can be seen as symptomatic of a series of political failures. These were all, in different ways, due to the politics of denial.

Partition

After each of the two traditions in Ireland entrenched themselves in a mythology which denied the reality of the other. The nationalist tradition in the island as a whole dismissed

unionism as a renegade tradition. The unionist government in Northern Ireland treated its large nationalist population as a disloyal underclass, to be ruthlessly disempowered rather than conciliated. Successive British governments resolutely ignored grave abuses taking place over decades under their delegated authority. Terrorism and fear poisoned daily life and distorted political activity. All of these things have left a legacy of mistrust and suspicion which still has to be fully dismantled.

The approach to a solution must patiently undo the failed approaches of the past across all the different relationships - the wider British-Irish relationship, the relationship between North and South in Ireland and the relationship between the two communities within Northern Ireland. New political arrangements are necessary across all three.

Agreement between the two sovereign governments sets the tone for the other areas. It is the necessary, even if not sufficient, condition for progress in the other two strands. The serious challenges which the conflict has posed for both governments has, fortunately, been matched by a steady growth of cooperation and solidarity between them. The Joint Declaration is a further decisive stage in that pattern, building on the foundations laid in the Anglo-Irish Agreement.

Joint Declaration

The Northern Ireland conflict might be summarised in technical terms as a disagreement about whether the application of the right of self-determination legitimately assigns the area to Irish or British jurisdiction. The Joint Declaration addresses this issue directly. The British Government recognises that it is for the people of Ireland alone, by agreement between

the two parts respectively and without external impediment, to exercise their right to self-determination on the basis of free and concurrent consent, North and South, to bring about a united Ireland, if that is their wish. The Irish Government accepts that the right of self-determination by the people of Ireland as a whole must be achieved and exercised with, and subject to, the agreement of a majority of the people in Northern Ireland, and formally commits itself to the role of promoting agreement in Ireland.

The Joint Declaration does not purport to be a solution to the problem. It concentrates instead on the vital preliminary of creating a peaceful process of negotiations. It seeks to accommodate the rival perspectives on self-determination in a way that both traditions can acknowledge.

By making the principle of free consent a key requirement in all arrangements, it seeks to eliminate unionist fears that nationalists will use their preponderance on the island to force the issue of Irish unity against the wishes of a majority in the North.

It offers nationalists the key reassurance that the obstacles to Irish unity are no longer those created by the actions or resistance of the British Government. There is now only the challenge of persuading the other Irish tradition of the desirability of that outcome. That in turn eliminates any vestige of justification for violence in the cause of the nationalist ideal.

The Declaration holds to the principle that negotiations must be confined to parties relying exclusively on their democratic mandates. At the same time, it offers a meaningful political alternative and an honourable avenue into negotiations for all those who leave violence behind and opt clearly for the political path.

The Declaration immediately attracted the support of a great majority of the people in Ireland, and across both traditions. Its importance as a statement of principle between the two governments is independent of the reaction of the paramilitaries, but their reaction is nonetheless an important factor in the situation.

IRA Ceasefire

At the end of August, after a protracted internal debate, the IRA declared a complete cessation of

military operations (Appendix 2). That position was confirmed in a number of subsequent statements. Even more significantly, and encouragingly, it has been sustained in practice on the ground in Northern Ireland. This has moreover been achieved without any sign of splits and dissensions. It is therefore a development of the utmost importance and potential.

There has been something of a debate about whether this cessation can be regarded as permanent. I accept that this is indeed a crucial question. The Irish Government has been clear and unambiguous from the beginning that a cessation had to be permanent. Our record of total opposition to violence means we would countenance no arrangement which implied, however obliquely, an acceptance that violence might be resumed in any circumstances.

However, we must be careful on all sides that we do not focus on an ideal of perfection in a way that hampers our ability to recognise and respond to the potentially historical change which has taken place.

If the debate on permanence amounts to the question of whether the cessation is merely a tactical ploy, or a cynical deception, I believe the great majority of informed observers would pronounce themselves satisfied that the statements which have been made by the IRA and the Sinn Fein President do indeed mean what they say, and that their decision to opt for the political path is genuine and meant to be for good.

If, on the other hand, it amounts to a quest for a guarantee that nothing can go wrong which might tragically frustrate the hope of permanent peace, I think we must acknowledge realistically that political life rarely offers the ideal condition we might wish, or any guarantees against failure of even the most sincere intentions. In that deeper sense, the issue of permanence is beyond the capacity of any individual to guarantee. It is, rather, a common goal to be attained.

The absence of violence is not peace. We know that serious political tensions remain to be settled. We know that there are still deadly arsenals of weapons in circulation - in both communities. Removing the bomb and the bullet from Irish life must not be just a figure of speech. It must be a determined programme of political and confidence-building measures which culminates, quite literally, in removing the weapons of

violence on all sides. The moment when anyone can talk confidently of a permanent peace is still some way down the road, and it will only come after strenuous efforts in which all must play a part. The absence of violence is in itself, however, a major breakthrough and the optimum starting-point in the search for permanent peace. It should be welcomed and consolidated as such, and built on to its fullest potential.

The next step is to seek to ensure that the cessation by the IRA is followed by all others who have resorted to violence for political ends. There is an encouraging debate within the ranks of the loyalist paramilitaries. I would hope that unionist representatives, in particular, whatever their doubts about IRA intentions, will not be distracted by that debate from making their voices strongly heard against a campaign of violence that is still unequivocally on-going on the loyalist side.² Many have honourably and eloquently done so already.

Long Term Goal

The longer term goal is an Ireland truly at peace, under agreed political institutions which cater both for our common interests and for our diversity, and earn the allegiance of all. If the failures of the past were due to denial and coercion, the politics of the future must aim single-mindedly at consent and inclusiveness. That may require many unique arrangements, but the solutions must be designed to fit the unique problems of a divided society.

Political Dialogue

All paths lead through the process of political dialogue. We envisage this process on two levels: Irish history, and the violence of the last quarter century, has left grave barriers of mistrust, and serious failures of understanding and communication, in many of our relationships on the island. For that reason we propose to set up a Forum for Peace and Reconciliation open to all democratic parties in Ireland who wish to join (Appendix 3).

Its task will be to explore, in a totally non-threatening and non-confrontational way, various approaches which would help to overcome these inherited barriers and promote the process of cooperation and reconciliation. It will not be a

negotiating forum, but we would hope its deliberations will improve the climate in which negotiations take place. Present indications are that the unionist parties, regrettably, will not feel able to participate, although it is greatly to be welcomed that the Alliance Party has agreed to do so. I would very much hope that the unionist parties who do not participate directly will find other ways, for example, individual or informal contributions to ensure that their vital input does not go by default.

Sooner or later - and I very much hope sooner rather than later - we must come to comprehensive negotiations involving the two governments and all the relevant parties in Northern Ireland. We must work out a new dispensation for Northern Ireland, which all can endorse, and new political structures to which all can give their allegiance. The cessation of violence by the IRA opens the way for the first time for such negotiations to take place on the basis of a shared commitment to peaceful, democratic values and to the principle of consent. It means they can include the entire spectrum of political opinion in Northern Ireland, and take place in a climate free of the grim shadow of violence and its attendant security repression. I believe there is now a golden window of opportunity for the two governments to give the lead in this respect and build on the momentum for peace.

Joint Framework Document

To advance this process both governments are at present working on a Joint Framework Document to be put eventually to the political parties.³ This will not be a blue-print, to be summarily imposed. It will, however, be the considered assessment by both governments of the broad lines of what might constitute a balanced and honourable accommodation, translating into practice the principles of the Joint Declaration. If it is to give real impetus to negotiations, it cannot merely settle for the lowest common denominator among the existing positions. That has often been tried, and failed. Rather, the two governments must create a new balance, challenging deeply all the existing positions, including their own. Unless the Joint Framework Document achieves this, it will fail in its purpose.

Nature of the Conflict

Irrespective of the positions which may be put in this document, one can already postulate from the nature of the conflict what some of the key features of a solution must be:

Because the conflict is embittered by memories of past coercion - and indeed fears of future coercion, with unionist and nationalist roles reversed - the principle of consent, and where possible, consensus, must be at the heart of all arrangements. Majoritarian procedures of government are inherently unsuitable for communities permanently divided along communal lines.

The conflict reflects opposing fears that either nationalists within Northern Ireland, or unionists in a united Ireland, will be the ultimate disadvantaged minority on the island. Therefore the notion of minority in either context must be purged of all connotations of victory or defeat. That can be achieved through full respect for the validity of each tradition and for the right of each community in Northern Ireland to complete protection for all their rights and to rigorous equality of treatment.

Since the communities in Northern Ireland have an allegiance and identity which, in each case, goes beyond the confines of Northern Ireland, the Irish - and for that matter the British - dimensions of the problem must be reflected in all future arrangements. That includes new and meaningful North/South institutions, to cater adequately for current and future interrelationships on the island as a whole.

Since the Irish and British Governments are, between them, responsible for every aspect of administration which could touch in any way on the problem, new arrangements must be guaranteed and buttressed by full agreement between them.

Since new arrangements must win the allegiance of both traditions we would propose that a new Agreement should be validated by referendum in both jurisdictions, and thus earn legitimacy in both unionist and nationalist perspectives alike.

It will not, of course, be easy to craft an Agreement which carries a majority in both areas: nevertheless I believe it would be unforgivable not to try.

Choice for Unionism

Just as this has been a time of difficult choice in the nationalist community, I believe the unionist community also stands, once again, at a cross-roads. One road might be to continue the politics of denial, of "no surrender". That will not prevent the world from changing, any more than it did in the past. It is surely clear by now that the future of unionism cannot be decided in disregard of their relationship with the nationalist tradition on the island. The alternative road could be a more constructive dialogue with nationalism about what the union means for unionists. Is it cherished as an expression of unionist allegiance and a protection of legitimate unionist rights? Or is it still thought of as an instrument to be brandished against the nationalist population, whether within Northern Ireland or in Ireland as a whole, or for asserting the dominance of the unionist community over them? If, as I believe, these negative dimensions of the Union are ever less central to unionist thinking, then that in itself is a strong argument for unionists to join all the other parties who are ready, as of now, to go to the negotiating table. There is now a unique opportunity for the unionist community to leave behind for ever the old nightmare of being merely a beleaguered outpost on the island.

US Role

In our search for a way forward the support of the international community is important for all traditions. I want to pay particular tribute to the role of the US Administration under President Clinton, and of our friends in Congress of both parties, and in the United States generally. As a concerned - and where necessary a candid - friend to both governments and to both communities, President Clinton's interest has been an invaluable resource to all sides in the quest for progress. One can say, very simply, that many crucial advances in the situation would have been impossible without the American dimension.

Conclusion

This, as I have said, is a time of hope. We have not yet risen to the collective challenge of building the solution, but very solid foundations have been laid. The elements for an honourable accommodation are now to hand. All that is needed now is the courage and imagination to put

them together, and so to close a centuries-old record of conflict in Ireland.

I am very hopeful that that will be achieved.

Appendix 1

Anglo-Irish Downing Street Declaration 15 December 1993.

The Taoiseach, Mr Albert Reynolds TD, and the Prime Minister, the Rt Hon John Major MP, acknowledge that the most urgent and important issue facing the people of Ireland, North and South, and the British and Irish Governments together, is to remove the causes of conflict, to overcome the legacy of history and to heal the divisions which have resulted, recognising that the absence of a lasting and satisfactory settlement of relationships between the peoples of both islands has contributed to continuing tragedy and suffering. They believe that the development of an agreed framework for peace, which has been discussed between them since early last year, and which is based on a number of key principles articulated by the two Governments over the past 20 years, together with the adaptation of other widely accepted principles, provides the starting point of a peace process designed to culminate in a political settlement.

The Taoiseach and the Prime Minister are convinced of the inestimable value, to both their peoples, and particularly for the next generation, of healing divisions in Ireland and of ending conflict which has been so manifestly to the detriment of all.

Both recognise that the ending of divisions can come about only through the agreement and cooperation of the people, North and South, representing both traditions in Ireland. They therefore make a solemn commitment to promote cooperation at all levels on the basis of the fundamental principles, undertakings, obligations under international agreements, to which they have jointly committed themselves, and the guarantees which each Government has given and now reaffirms, including Northern Ireland's statutory constitutional guarantee. It is their aim to foster agreement and reconciliation, leading to a new political framework founded on consent

and encompassing arrangements within Northern Ireland for the whole island and between these islands.

They also consider that the development of Europe will, of itself, require new approaches to serve interests common to both parts of the island of Ireland, and to Ireland and the United Kingdom as partners in the European Union.

The Prime Minister, on behalf of the British Government reaffirms that they will uphold the democratic wish of a greater number of the people of Northern Ireland on the issue of whether they prefer to support the Union or a sovereign united Ireland. On this basis, he reiterates, on behalf of the British Government, that they have no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland. Their primary interest is to see peace, stability and reconciliation established by agreement among all the people who inhabit the island, and they will work together with the Irish Government to achieve such an agreement, which will embrace the totality of relationships.

The role of the British Government will be to encourage, facilitate and enable the achievement of such agreement over a period, through a process of dialogue and cooperation based on full respect for the rights and identities of both traditions in Ireland. They accept that such agreement may, as of right, take the form of agreed structures for the island as a whole, including a united Ireland achieved by peaceful means on the following basis: The British Government agrees that it is for the people of the island of Ireland alone, by agreement between the two parts respectively, to exercise their right of self-determination on the basis of consent, freely and concurrently given, North and South, to bring about a united Ireland, if that is their wish. They reaffirm, as a binding obligation, that they will, for their part, introduce the necessary legislation to give effect to this, or equally to any measure of agreement on future relationships in Ireland which the people living in Ireland themselves freely so determine without external impediment. They believe that the people of Britain would wish, in friendship to all sides, to enable the people of Ireland to reach agreement on how they may live together in harmony and in partnership, with respect for their diverse traditions, and with full recognition of the special links and the unique relationship which exists between the peoples of Britain and Ireland.

The Taoiseach, on behalf of the Irish Government, considers that the lessons of Irish history, and especially of Northern Ireland, show that stability and well-being will not be found under any political system which is refused allegiance or rejected on grounds of identity by a significant minority of those governed by it. For this reason, it would be wrong to attempt to impose a united Ireland, in the absence of the freely given consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland. He accepts, on behalf of the Irish Government, that the democratic right of self-determination by the people of Ireland as a whole must be achieved and exercised with, and subject to, the agreement and consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland, and must, consistent with justice and equity, respect the democratic dignity and the civil rights and religious liberties of both communities, including:

- the right of free political thought;
- the right to freedom and expression of religion;
- the right to pursue, democratically, national and political aspirations;
- the right to seek constitutional change by peaceful and legitimate means;
- the right to live wherever one chooses without hindrance;
- the right to equal opportunity in all social and economic activity, regardless of class, creed, sex or colour.

These would be reflected in any future political and constitutional arrangements emerging from a new and more broadly based agreement. The Taoiseach, however, recognises the genuine difficulties and barriers to building relationships of trust either within or beyond Northern Ireland, from which both traditions suffer. He will work to create a new era of trust, in which suspicion of the motives or actions of others is removed on the part of either community. He considers that the future of the island depends on the nature of the relationship between the two main traditions that inhabit it.

Every effort must be made to build a new sense of trust between those communities. In recognition of the fears of the Unionist community, and as a token of his willingness to make a personal

contribution to the building up of that necessary trust, the Taoiseach will examine with his colleagues any elements in the democratic life and organisation of the Irish State that can be represented to the Irish Government, in the course of political dialogue, as a real and substantial threat to their way of life and ethos, or that can be represented as not being fully consistent with a modern democratic and pluralist society, and undertakes to examine any possible ways of removing such obstacles.

Such an examination would, of course, have due regard to the desire to preserve those inherited values that are largely shared throughout the island or that belong to the cultural and historical roots of the people of this island in all their diversity. The Taoiseach hopes that, over time, a meeting of hearts and minds will develop, which will bring all the people of Ireland together, and will work towards that objective, but he pledges in the meantime that, as a result of the efforts that will be made to build mutual confidence, no Northern unionist should ever have to fear in future that this ideal will be pursued either by threat or coercion.

Both Governments accept that Irish unity would be achieved only by those who favour this outcome persuading those who do not, peacefully and without coercion or violence, and that, if in the future a majority of the people of Northern Ireland are so persuaded, both Governments will support and give legislative effect to their wish.

But, notwithstanding the solemn affirmation by both Governments in the Anglo-Irish agreement that any change in the status of Northern Ireland would only come about with the consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland, the Taoiseach also recognises the continuing uncertainties and misgivings which dominate so much of Northern unionist attitudes towards the rest of Ireland. He believes that we stand at a stage of our history when the genuine feelings of all traditions in the North must be recognised and acknowledged. He appeals to both traditions at this time to grasp the opportunity for a fresh start and a new beginning, which could hold such promise for all our lives and the generations to come. He asks the people of Northern Ireland to look on the people of the Republic as friends, who share their grief and shame over all the suffering of the last quarter of a century, and who want to develop the best possible relationship

with them, a relationship in which trust and new understanding can flourish and grow.

The Taoiseach also acknowledges the presence, in the constitution of the Republic, of elements which are deeply resented by Northern Unionists, but which at the same time reflect hopes and ideals which lie deep in the hearts of many Irish men and women, North and South. But, as we move towards a new era of understanding in which new relationships of trust may grow and bring peace to the island of Ireland, the Taoiseach believes that the time has come to consider together how best the hopes and identities of all can be expressed in more balanced ways, which no longer engender division and the lack of trust to which he has referred. He confirms that, in the event of an overall settlement, the Irish Government will, as part of a balanced constitutional accommodation, put forward and support proposals for change in the Irish constitution which would fully reflect the principle of consent in Northern Ireland.

The Taoiseach recognises the need to engage in dialogue which would address with honesty and integrity the fears of all traditions. But that dialogue, both within the North and between the people and their representatives of both parts of Ireland, must be entered into with an acknowledgement that the future security and welfare of the people of the island will depend on an open, frank and balanced approach to all the problems which, for too long, have caused division.

The British and Irish Governments will seek, along with the Northern Ireland constitutional parties through a process of political dialogue, to create institutions and structures which, while respecting the diversity of the people of Ireland, would enable them to work together in all areas of common interest. This will help over a period to build the trust necessary to end past divisions, leading to an agreed and peaceful future. Such structures would, of course, include institutional recognition of the special links that exist between the peoples of Britain and Ireland as part of the totality of relationships, while taking account of newly forged links with the rest of Europe.

The British and Irish Governments reiterate that the achievement of peace must involve a permanent end to the use of, or support for, paramilitary violence. They confirm that, in these circumstances, democratically mandated parties

which establish a commitment to exclusively peaceful methods and which have shown that they abide by the democratic process, are free to participate fully in democratic politics and to join in dialogue in due course between the Governments and the political parties on the way ahead.

The Irish Government would make their own arrangements within their jurisdiction to enable democratic parties to consult together and share in dialogue about the political future. The Taoiseach's intention is that these arrangements could include the establishment, in consultation with other parties, of a Forum for Peace and Reconciliation to make recommendations on ways in which agreement and trust between both traditions in Ireland can be promoted and established.

The Taoiseach and the Prime Minister are determined to build on the fervent wish of both their peoples to see old fears and animosities replaced by a climate of peace. They believe the framework they have set out offers the people of Ireland, North and South, whatever their tradition, the basis to agree that from now on their differences can be negotiated and resolved exclusively by peaceful political means. They appeal to all concerned to grasp the opportunity for a new departure. That step would compromise no position or principle, nor prejudice the future for either community. On the contrary, it would be an incomparable gain for all. It would break decisively the cycle of violence and the intolerable suffering it entails for both communities in Northern Ireland. It would allow the process of economic and social cooperation on the island to realise its full potential for prosperity and mutual understanding. It would transform the prospect for building on the progress already made in the talks process, involving the two Governments and the constitutional parties in Northern Ireland.

The Taoiseach and the Prime Minister believe that these arrangements offer an opportunity to lay foundations for a more peaceful and harmonious future devoid of the violence and bitter divisions which have scarred the past generation. They commit themselves and their Governments to continue to work together, unremittingly, towards that objective.

Appendix 2

IRA Statement, 31 August 1994.⁴

Recognising the potential of the current situation and in order to enhance the democratic peace process and underline our definitive commitment to its success the leadership of Oglaiġ na h Eireann have decided that as of midnight, Wednesday 31 August, there will be a complete cessation of military operations. All our units have been instructed accordingly.

At this historic crossroads the leadership of Oglaiġ na h Eireann salutes and commends our Volunteers, other activists, our supporters and the political prisoners who have sustained this struggle against all odds for the past 25 years. Your courage, determination and sacrifices have demonstrated that the spirit of freedom and the desire for peace based on a just and lasting settlement cannot be crushed. We remember all those who have died for Irish freedom and we reiterate our commitment to our republican objectives.

Our struggle has seen many gains and advances made by nationalists and for the democratic position. We believe that an opportunity to create a just and lasting settlement has been created. We are therefore entering into a new situation in a spirit of determination and confidence: determined that the injustices which created the conflict will be removed and confident in the strength and justice of our struggle to achieve this.

We note that the Downing Street Declaration is not a solution, nor was it presented as such by its authors. A solution will only be found as a result of inclusive negotiations. Others, not least the British Government, have a duty to face up to their responsibilities. It is our desire to significantly contribute to the creation of a climate which will encourage this. We urge everyone to approach this new situation with energy, determination and patience.

Appendix 3

Joint statement by the Taoiseach, Mr Albert Reynolds, TD, the Leader of the SDLP, Mr John Hume, MEP, and the Leader of Sinn Fein, Mr Gerry Adams.

We are at the beginning of a new era in which we are all totally and absolutely committed to democratic and peaceful methods of resolving our political problems. We reiterate that our objective is an equitable and lasting agreement that can command the allegiance of all. We see the Forum as a major instrument in that process. We reiterate that we cannot resolve this problem without the participation and agreement of the unionist people. We call on everyone to use all their influence to bring this agreement about.

- 1 Based on an address by the Tanaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr Dick Spring TD in Washington D C, 30 September 1994.
- 2 A loyalist paramilitary ceasefire was subsequently announced on 13 October 1994.
- 3 As of January 1995 the British and Irish governments were reported to be making only slow progress towards agreeing to the text of the Joint Framework Document.
- 4 P O'Neill, Irish Republican Publicity Bureau, Dublin, *An Phoblacht*, 1 September 1994.