

Irish Government Address to Opening Meeting in Strand Two

Delivered by Mr John O Donoghue TD, Minister for Justice Equality and Law Reform

Tuesday 7 October 1997

Mr. Chairman,

Our presence here today for the opening of substantive negotiations in the three strands represents the fruit of many months of assiduous effort on the part of all of us gathered around this table. This is an event of landmark significance in our collective pursuit of a lasting and comprehensive settlement. On my own behalf, and on behalf of the Irish Government, I wish to offer you, Mr Chairman, and your colleagues our profound thanks for all the skill and patience you have shown.

We have arrived here after a difficult and at times tortuous negotiation over almost a year and a half. I would like to congratulate all of the parties represented here today for the steadiness and commitment they have shown in engaging in this process.

Many of the parties have shown the courage to move away from the fixed positions to which they have clung for so long in order to take part in these talks. In this they are representing both the best interests and the expressed wishes of the people who elected them. All too often in the past the lack of such leadership and willingness to take risks for peace has defeated efforts to reach a political settlement.

All democratic parties belong here, and it is for that reason especially regrettable that two of the

parties, the Democratic Unionist Party and the United Kingdom Unionist Party, have chosen for the moment not to take part in our work. I ask both parties to consider carefully how best the interests of their electors can be represented, and to join us here. Their voices should be heard, and our work will be the stronger for it.

There are, unfortunately, small groups in both communities, but with no mandate from either, who even now have not yet accepted the futility of violence, and who aim to provoke the collapse of these talks by playing on the fears of the parties participating. We must not let these groups deflect us from our purpose, for the sake of the vast majority of the population represented by the democratic parties here today.

Nor must we allow ourselves to lose sight of the urgency of finding a solution to the difficulties that have so long and so destructively divided the two main traditions on this island, and especially here in Northern Ireland. Too many generations have grown up in an environment of violence and political stalemate, and only the middle aged and elderly can now remember a time before the Troubles.

Nevertheless, the people of both communities have shown a fierce determination that the ceasefires should develop into a permanent peace, and that the violence must not start again. It is they who have urged their political representatives to come here and find an agreement.

With the increased hope of the people has come a greater risk should we fail. Much political capital and much hope on both sides has been invested in the talks we begin in earnest today.

If we fail, the loss of both will not easily be recouped.

Some of us have been here, or close to here, before. The three stranded negotiations in 1991-92, while they were ultimately unable to reach agreement in the time available, did demonstrate that both the Governments and the political parties in Northern Ireland could engage in serious, constructive and ground-breaking discussions. Progress was made that can be built on for our work now.

Mr. Chairman,

We will do ourselves and our electors a disservice if we minimise the very real difficulties that still lie ahead. At their heart is the fundamental divide between the Nationalist and Unionist perspectives on the status and future of Northern Ireland. For far too long each side has talked only to itself. We must now talk to each other, listen to each other and seek to address each others' concerns.

These talks must be based on honest recognition of our differences. I represent a party and a Government, and indeed a nation, who have as an ideal the achievement of a united Ireland encompassing all our people from every political, cultural and religious background. It is a proud and valid aspiration to which I have been committed all my political life. But there is an overwhelming consensus that the only means by which we should aim, or ever want, to bring this about is by peaceful persuasion of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland.

No party has to abandon its ideals to participate in these negotiations. There are no hidden traps

here. The Irish and British Governments, with the help of the parties and especially of yourselves, Mr Chairmen, have worked long and carefully to develop a format for these talks which threatens no one. Any agreement we reach must be able to command majority support separately in each of the main traditions represented here. It must be approved by Parliament and by the people in referenda, North and South.

The objective of the Irish Government is to reach an agreement acceptable to the widest possible spectrum of opinion in Northern Ireland and Ireland as a whole. No one will be able to claim, on this occasion, that they did not have the opportunity to make their voice heard in these talks.

I believe we are close enough today, based on the progress made in previous talks, on the values and principles expressed in the Joint Declaration and the possible outcome posited in the Joint Framework Document, and united by a common commitment to purely peaceful and democratic methods, to begin to discern the shape which a settlement will take, or at least the ground upon which it will be built.

Through many false starts and stalled initiatives we have come to a broad acceptance that a solution cannot be imposed by the Governments, or constructed in the context of Northern Ireland alone. We have reached a common understanding that the three-stranded process is the way forward. Each strand represents a different aspect of the solution, but all three are closely interwoven and they must be developed in parallel and in full if they are to constitute a sound agreement.

While experience has shown that a purely internal settlement cannot be agreed and could not work, the Irish Government readily accepts that devolved political structures in Northern Ireland are desirable, to allow for decisions to be taken as close as possible to the communities they affect, and by Irish people of both traditions. This is in line with thinking in the European Union context, and indeed to some degree with the present moves to devolve more power to regions within the United Kingdom. It will also provide a forum where the elected representatives of the people of Northern Ireland can begin to work together and cooperate in the day to day tasks of bettering the lives of their communities, which is the stuff of democratic politics everywhere.

Mr. Chairman,

All of the parties here are engaged in the discussions in Strand One, which began this morning. The Irish Government will maintain an extremely close interest in the outcome of the work in that Strand.

We are now opening the negotiations in Strand Two, in which the Irish Government will be centrally involved. In our view, the creation of dynamic North/South institutions or bodies is an essential element to any solution, to express and cater for the many natural inter-connections on this island, be they the political and cultural links with the South felt and desired, by Northern Nationalists, or the potential for a productive intensification of common effort across a wide range of practical issues that could in principle be welcomed across the community.

The idea of such structures is not new. Until 1920 almost all administrative structures in Ireland were run by the devolved British administration in Dublin on an all-Ireland basis. The framers

of the Government of Ireland Act clearly intended that this situation should continue as much as possible after, or despite, partition.

While partition might have made some sense, on the political level, to one side in Northern Ireland, it had little economic logic, and overall at different times it has had serious negative effects on both parts of the island. The level of economic interaction across the border historically, for instance, has been very low. We have, in the past, often developed our economies in a way which ignored potential markets and opportunities in our own back yard.

This artificial brake on our development must be removed; we need to remove the barriers to the operation of a single market on the island of Ireland. The creation of an all-Ireland marketplace can create significant new employment and add to the prosperity of our people, too many of whom have had to seek their fortunes elsewhere.

Ireland has already proved itself, despite this retarding effect, to be a very profitable and attractive location for international investment. Both parts of the island exhibit dynamic economic growth. We have young, well educated populations and a largely unspoilt environment. Potential investors find attractive investment packages here. In the South, we have been particularly successful in attracting North American investment in recent years, and we have enjoyed consistent and sustained growth at high levels in economic output and jobs for many years. The issue should not just be seen in institutional terms. It is the opportunity for all parts of the island to participate together in fostering the potential dynamism that is now evident.

Some commentators are beginning to speak of the golden age of the Irish economy. It would

be a pity if the people of Northern Ireland were not to have the option to share in that, as part of getting the best of both worlds

There have been different studies made of the potential economic effects of creating a true single market in Ireland. These have differed in their detailed conclusions, but not in their basic acceptance that both economies would benefit greatly from a single market. Our own Confederation of Irish Industry has estimated that North/South trade could be trebled and thousands of new jobs created on the island. No one is suggesting that either part of Ireland forego its trade with Britain or elsewhere, but simply that the home market, which is determined principally by geography, and which is often the springboard for export success, be enlarged.

Business organisations, of course, have been increasingly aware for many years that it is in the interests of both parts of the island to work together. The CBI and IBEC established a Joint Business Council in 1991. There is increasing cooperation and contact between Chambers of Commerce, industrial and trade organisations, research and technological bodies and universities. At a macroeconomic level, the Northern Ireland Economic Council and the National Economic and Social Council cooperate closely. At local government level, local authorities in border areas have already formed links to consult and cooperate with each other.

We also work together increasingly abroad, where Ireland is naturally perceived as an economic unit. Valuable co-ordination of effort is already underway between North and South in overseas markets. Our geographic size and small domestic market, our peripheral location and compatible legal and regulatory regimes, make it obviously sensible to work together in

marketing ourselves and our products abroad, to name but one dynamic area of possible cooperation on this island.

Significant North/South institutions will represent first and foremost the recognition that there are many areas of activity which can most profitably be organised together on this small island, rather than separately in the two jurisdictions. This will deliver for our people practical advantages in both operational effectiveness and cost efficiency.

Nor should the concept of these bodies having executive powers give rise to any alarm: it simply recognises that such bodies should be able to carry out their own decisions. These bodies will represent a pooling of our effort and resources to the common good of all our people, in the manner in which we have become accustomed to work together in Europe in the last 25 years. It should not be beyond us here to devise adequate safeguards for the democratic control and supervision of these bodies.

The arguments in favour of reinforcing North - South cooperation have never been stronger. There is surging economic growth on both sides of the border. Unemployment is falling. New investors are seeking to maximise economies of scale by trading in an all-Ireland market.

Most of this is market driven, but there has been a crucial input from the two Governments and the European Union. It is vital that these positive developments are underpinned by effective governmental and public sector strategies in key areas.

A strong North - South Body invested with appropriate powers will provide the means for doing this. It will also, and most importantly, allow Northern Nationalists the chance to share along with unionists the sense that their aspirations and identity are reflected in the governance and administration of their own place.

We need also to examine how Ireland as a whole is best represented in the European Union, and the scope for the Irish Government, in cooperation with the British Government, to represent and support the concerns of Northern Ireland as a region of the EU. We need also to take full advantage of policies designed to stimulate inter-regional and cross-border cooperation.

Later this evening, the two Governments will meet to commence discussions in Strand Three. We will be discussing in that Strand measures to enhance the cooperation of the two Governments, taking into account, in due course, the developing outlines of the settlement in the other two Strands.

Both Governments have confirmed, as signatories of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, that we would be prepared to consider a new and more broadly based Agreement which would take its place.

We do not see this as in any way moving away from the approach and achievements of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, but as building on it and widening its scope to build in the input of elected representatives in Northern Ireland into the intergovernmental dialogue. I expect that we will agree to consult the parties on our intentions as regards Strand Three at the next available opportunity.

We have before us a full programme of work in all three Strands. For our part, the Irish Government will be elaborating our own ideas, and I will be listening with great interest to the views of the other delegations. We speak from many different perspectives and backgrounds, but I believe absolutely that we can here arrive between us at a settlement which can be accepted by the people we represent.

It is unlikely that the final agreement will fully incorporate the ideal position of any of the participants. But we have come here in a common acceptance that democratic politics is the only way forward, and that we must make compromises. I am convinced we can succeed. I can assure you that the Irish Government will play its part to the -full in reaching the settlement we all want.