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21 October 1994

THE PRIME MINISTER

*Dear John,*

You will have heard that I am visiting Northern Ireland today. I shall shortly be making a speech on the present situation and the Government's plans for the way ahead to a lunch of the Institute of Directors. I am sending you a copy of my text, and I hope that you will support and participate in our efforts to consolidate the ceasefire and carry the political talks process forward.

*Yours Ever,  
John Major*

Dr. John Alderdice

PRIME MINISTER'S  
SPEECH TO INSTITUTE OF DIRECTORS LUNCH  
BELFAST, 21 OCTOBER 1994

Mr Chairman,

From the moment I stepped into Downing Street, I believed that the overwhelming majority of the people of Northern Ireland wanted peace.

Over the years they have demonstrated this in countless ways - the remarkable peace movement of the 1970s, the many groups and individuals who have worked so hard to heal community divisions.

It was this conviction that gave birth to the Downing Street Declaration. An opportunity for peace existed and the Taoiseach, Albert Reynolds and I both wished to take it.

The Downing Street Declaration recognised the rights of both main traditions in Northern Ireland, but threatened the interests of neither. It showed that violence had no justification - and it offered a route into legitimate politics for those who abandoned violence.

When I spoke to you in March, many people had lost hope that the Downing Street Declaration could lead to peace. I mention this only to remind everyone that we should not accept set-backs. There may be more. And, if there are, we should persist and overcome them.

I expressed hope against the prevailing wind. Today there is a chance - a chance not a certainty - that hope would become reality.

Seven months after I last spoke to you, seven weeks after the IRA ceasefire, seven days after the Loyalist paramilitary ceasefire, Northern Ireland is at peace. There is a different atmosphere.

Fear has been lifted from daily life.

People have begun to take the bars off their windows.

Trade in the High Street has gone up by 6% in one month.

Even sceptical commentators - with years of history to support their scepticism - are beginning to wonder whether, perhaps, a corner has been turned.

As to that, we shall see. But there has been a very encouraging beginning.

Now have to move on. Towards a full return to democratic life. Towards a time when violence will be no more than a bad memory. Towards a just and lasting peace.

We have practical obstacles to overcome. Some of them will be difficult. We also have history to overcome and that will be even harder. Old enmities, old suspicions, old fears still swirl around and obscure opportunities that may lie ahead.

We are right to be cautious. But there is no entirely risk-free approach. With care and with calculation we must judge the art of the possible and deliver it.

I cannot guarantee success. But I do believe the chances of success are better than for generations.

Let me set out, therefore, the next steps I propose to take.

Our task is to make sure that the violence is over for good. We must aim to make a return to violence unthinkable.

Throughout these seven weeks, Sinn Fein and the IRA have sought to convey the impression that the ceasefire is permanent, but they have not stated this unambiguously. Because they left scope for doubt, I resisted pressure to set an early date for exploratory talks.

Instead, we have reviewed their actions. These have been more compelling than their words.

As a result, I am now prepared to make a working assumption that the ceasefire is intended to be permanent. This means we can move carefully towards the beginning of dialogue between Sinn Fein and the Government.

The basis for this dialogue is unchanged. There must be a genuine commitment by Sinn Fein to use and support only peaceful methods in a democratic political arena. We shall expect to see continuing practical evidence of this commitment. We shall not be able to proceed if it called into question.

If we can continue reasonably to assume that Sinn Fein is establishing a commitment to exclusively peaceful methods; if the IRA continues to show that it has ended its terrorism; then we shall be ready to convene exploratory talks before this year is out.

This preliminary dialogue between representatives of the Government and of Sinn Fein will be crucial.

It will explore how Sinn Fein can make a transition to normal political life. How it would be able to play the same part as the existing constitutional parties. How it could enter the political talks process.

And we shall discuss the practical consequences of ending violence - most obviously how illegal weapons and explosives are going to be removed from life in Northern Ireland. Peace cannot be assured finally until the paramilitaries on both sides hand in their weapons. This is a difficult issue but it cannot be ducked. We must consider therefore how guns and explosives can best be deposited and decommissioned. These weapons are both North and South of the border. So we shall be consulting the Irish Government on a coordinated approach.

It is through the political talks process that we wish to secure a lasting settlement. And I repeat today the promise I have given before: when these talks between the constitutional parties and the two Governments are over, we shall seek the approval of the people of Northern Ireland for the outcome as a whole in a referendum. Their consent is essential.

As you know, the British and Irish Governments are working on a Joint Framework Document. I shall be discussing it with the Taoiseach on Monday.

I know there is concern about the document. Let me repeat: it will not be a blueprint. It is intended to help further discussion and negotiation and it will represent our joint understanding of what is most likely to secure widespread acceptance.

When the document is finished, we shall publish it, for all to see. It will not be kept a secret with the danger that it will cause suspicions. As with the Downing Street Declaration, everyone will be able to get a copy, to see exactly what it says and what it does not say.

This way it should not be misunderstood or misinterpreted.

I am determined the people of Northern Ireland will have the chance to give their views. I want them to see that it is faithful to the Downing Street Declaration and to our unshakeable constitutional guarantee that their future lies in their hands.

The Joint Framework Document concentrates on relations between the two Governments, and between Northern Ireland and the Republic.

But, as part of an overall settlement, the British Government is also concerned with new arrangements for government within Northern Ireland. This is a matter for discussion between the British Government and the Northern Ireland Parties.

We therefore intend to publish simultaneously our own proposals on a possible way forward within Northern Ireland. These, too, like the Joint Framework Document, will be a guide for discussions and negotiations aimed at widespread acceptance.

In this way the people of Northern Ireland will be able to see the full shape of a possible settlement. It is the overall shape of the whole package which must secure consent if it is to succeed.

We want to restore local accountability. We shall therefore include proposals for an assembly - drawing, without attribution, on the work done in the 1992 Talks and the lessons of Michael Ancram's exchanges with the parties. Again, we will be seeking a basis for broad agreement. Neither a purely internal solution, nor a return to domination of one side by the other, would achieve this. Local democracy requires support across the community.

Mr Chairman,

The loyalist ceasefire is very welcome. There are no circumstances which could justify a resumption of their violence.

The route to democratic politics is open to all who renounce violence, and we of course want Loyalists to be able to express their views democratically.

Therefore, once they have sufficiently demonstrated their commitment to exclusively peaceful methods, they can take part in public life. At the appropriate time, the Government will enter into contact with them.

We will be looking for ways of taking their views into account in the talks process. We want to hear the concerns, not least the social concerns, of the communities from which they come.

Mr Chairman, in matters of security we shall not take risks. We shall not make concessions to those who defy the law. We shall not lower our guard prematurely. But of course we want Northern Ireland to return to a more relaxed and normal way of life.

The ceasefire has already allowed the security forces to respond to a diminished threat. Today, on their advice, the Secretary of State has rescinded all the remaining closer orders on border crossings. This will allow freer movement, although the security forces will continue to patrol the border for the time being.

Exclusion Orders have been another constraint required to counter terrorism. We hope that the day is approaching when they will no longer be needed. The numbers are already lower than they were when Parliament renewed the Prevention of Terrorism Act in March.

Now that we are moving towards preliminary dialogue, I can announce that the Home Secretary has today lifted the Orders which excluded Mr Gerry Adams and Mr Martin McGuinness from Great Britain. They are free to travel anywhere within the United Kingdom, provided they remain committed to the democratic process.

Other Exclusion Orders will remain in place for the time being but the Home Secretary and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland will keep the need for them under review.

Let me turn now to the policing of the streets and of the countryside.

We had to deploy additional troops in Northern Ireland from 1969 in support of the police because of the level of violence. And the Army has done an outstanding job here.

While Northern Ireland remains part of the United Kingdom, there will always be a peacetime role for some members of the Armed Forces, just as there is in other parts of the United Kingdom. We shall keep as many policemen and troops as we need, for as long as we need to protect the population. But the need for soldiers to patrol the streets will continue to be reviewed in relation to the threat, and it is our firm objective to return to exclusively civilian policing.

Terrorism has prevented the Royal Ulster Constabulary from operating in the same way as police forces in the rest of the United Kingdom. Its officers have shown extraordinary courage and tenacity. They have made many sacrifices. They have every reason to look forward to lasting peace, and to the prospect of leading more normal lives.

They know that an end to the threat of violence will bring new challenges. They know they need to police by consent, and they will have our full support in seeking to achieve that. But let me make clear here and now: no groups can - or will - be allowed to take the law into their own hands. All sections of the community must have confidence in the police and must enjoy equal protection from crime. In Northern Ireland the role and duty of enforcing the law must rest with the police alone.

Mr Chairman, peace will give a massive boost to Northern Ireland's economy. Equally, the chance of more prosperity, more jobs, better security for families, must be the most powerful incentive for peace.

I know that the business community is already preparing for new opportunities. So is the Government, in partnership with you.

I can now announce that we shall be convening a large investment conference here in Belfast in December.

I hope that many of you will take part. We shall be asking the Institute of Directors and the CBI at national level to encourage their members to look at investment opportunities here. We shall invite senior figures from the City of London. And we shall also invite potential investors and business leaders from overseas - from Europe, the United States and the Far East.

We are of course already in close touch with the European Commission. The President of the European Commission has established a special task force to look at a new European Community programme for Northern Ireland. This initiative aims to fund new projects to regenerate the inner cities. It will focus on action to cut long term unemployment, attract inward investment and stimulate tourism.

The details of the European Commission's initiative are still being worked out, in consultation with us and with others. From my latest contacts with Jacques Delors, I am confident that this initiative will result in a substantial package of new measures and new money.

I say new money. The European Union's programme will be in addition to the British Government's own expenditure plans for Northern Ireland. These, as you know, have long been supported by the EU's structural funds. The European Union has also increased its contribution to the International Fund for Ireland.

Let me make two further points on economic and social support.

First, we have long recognised the particular needs of Northern Ireland. We have set public spending at a level above the UK average, and provided a subvention of over £3 billion last year to finance this.

The people of Northern Ireland will get our continued support in the future. We understand that they face exceptional economic and social difficulties. Some will result, indeed, from the transition to peace - such as the consequences for employment of an end to terrorism.

I can assure you that the Government will take full account of Northern Ireland's special needs in setting future levels of public spending for the Province. We want to help the Province to enjoy higher levels of economic growth and much greater prosperity throughout the community in the future.

Second, we need your ideas, the ideas of people throughout Northern Ireland on the projects we and the European Union should back and the support we can most usefully give. So the Government will now start consultations with business and financial interests in the Province. We shall also consult the leaders and chief executives of the local councils in Northern Ireland. They are in day to day touch with people. So I intend shortly to issue invitations to them to meet me at Downing Street. I believe they can play a significant role in carrying forward our plans for a better future.

Mr Chairman, from this moment we are in a new phase of the peace process. A transitional phase which will lead to exploratory talks.

For twenty five years violence has been the enemy of progress in Northern Ireland.

Think what opportunities have been lost, what could have been done to advance all areas of life here, were it not for the burden of terrorism.

Local democracy has been held back. A generation of politicians has been denied full responsibility.

In the community, walls have been going up where we should have spent the past twenty five years breaking them down.

In the economy, for every million pounds of investment you have attracted, there should have been many millions. For every tourist there should have been thirty. For every hotel, factory or shop repaired after a bomb, we could have built a new one.

We cannot make up twenty five lost years overnight. We shall have to make Herculean efforts. That is the purpose of the initiatives I have announced today. To begin to improve the lives of everyone in Northern Ireland as quickly as we can.

Above all, we must make the price of breaking the peace so high that there would be no shred of sympathy, no glimmer of support for anyone who contemplated using violence again.

Every day without violence shows more clearly the benefits of peace.

Mr Chairman, the future of Northern Ireland lies in the hands of its own people. Not just of those leaders - the leaders of political parties, of the churches, of the business community - who have always stood by peaceful methods. But of all the people.

I know that they want peace. And they know that peace has not been brought through any secret deals or promises.

They know of our commitment to the balanced and even-handed principles of the Downing Street Declaration, including consent and the search for agreement among all the people living in Ireland.

They will be invited to comment on the Joint Framework Document, and on our proposals for local accountability.

They will be asked to vote on the outcome of the three-stranded talks.

They must establish a just basis for living together in the future, giving parity of esteems and equity of treatment to both main traditions and enabling all law abiding citizens to live free from the threat of violence.

Let me speak directly to each and every person in Northern Ireland. If you want peace, say so now. Loudly. Don't sit back. Join the crusade for the future. Go to your friends. Go to your neighbours. Go to anyone you know who has ever supported violence.

You have not had this chance in years and you cannot afford to miss it. Let your voices be heard.

Ultimately you, and you alone, can ensure that Northern Ireland never goes backwards. And the benefits will be yours.