

speeches
by others.

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OPENING REMARKS BY MR MALCOLM MOSS MP TO
A MEETING OF BELFAST CITY COUNCIL ON
11 MAY 1995

1. Lord Mayor, I am very grateful to you for your welcome and for this opportunity to meet your Council.

2. I would like to start, Lord Mayor, by recording my congratulations for the way in which you have carried out your responsibilities during your year of office. You have set a very fine example to all the citizens of Belfast and have spoken bravely and honestly about the issues of the day. Belfast has been very fortunate at this critically important time in its history to have had Hugh Smyth as its first citizen.

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3. It is, I understand, 10 years since a Government Minister met Belfast City Council and I hope that today's occasion will mark the start of a new and successful relationship between Government and the City's elected representatives.
4. I want to use this occasion to take stock of what has been achieved in Belfast, to raise some important issues about the city's future, and to suggest how we might begin to address these issues.
5. Belfast is a great city, located in a magnificent natural setting. It has a proud history of achievement in industry, commerce, sport and the arts.

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6. But it has, especially over the last quarter of a century, faced enormous difficulties. These difficulties have arisen in part from terrorist violence and deep community differences. They have arisen also from major social and economic changes - the decline of traditional industries, the redevelopment of large parts of the inner city, the continued movement of population out of the City Council's area.

7. The City has survived those difficulties and indeed has fought back with remarkable success. The City's people have again and again demonstrated great spirit and resilience. Many bodies, organisations and individuals can take great credit for what they have achieved in the most difficult circumstances.

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8. Lord Mayor, the Council itself has played and continues to play a very significant role. The Council provides a range of important public services to the people of the city, and you have continued to seek ways of providing the ratepayers with better value for money. The Council has worked closely with other agencies, for example, with my Department in improving the city centre. You have made a major contribution to regeneration through your relationship with the Laganside Corporation, for example, on Laganbank and the Gasworks site. Your Concert Hall is already becoming a landmark in the City and will, I am sure, be seen in future as one of the City's most imaginative and successful ventures. The Council is, in conjunction with my Department and the private sector, addressing the

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issue of marketing and promoting the city as a place to visit, to invest or to shop. You have formulated an arts and culture strategy. The Council has been seeking to develop imaginatively its role on economic development and I understand that an economic development strategy will be launched in the near future.

9. Thus, the City's elected representatives are already playing their part in determining the city's future. I want today to explore how that role can be developed further, in co-operation with others, in addressing, at a strategic level, some of the key questions about the City's future. In doing so, I want to stress my belief that much more can be

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achieved if we can together look, positively, at the future of the whole city. As the elected representatives of Belfast, you can give the quality of civic leadership which rejects the defensive and polarised attitudes of the past and which reaches above and beyond the narrow divisions which have plagued this city for too long.

10. Government Departments and public bodies have also made very significant contributions to the City. As you all know, major advances have been made by the Housing Executive and housing associations in tackling unfit and substandard housing; the City has now some of the best public sector housing in Europe. I am glad to note that many tenants have purchased their homes and that the private sector contribution to the housing effort is increasing.

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11. Dramatic success has been achieved in reviving the City Centre and we are seeking to build further on that success, for example, through the vision for the city centre published last year. In recent years some £140m of private sector investment with 3,000 jobs has been attracted to Belfast through DOE's urban regeneration work. Property values in the City have been growing faster than in cities in GB. Substantial progress has been made in improving transport with continued improvements in Belfast Harbour and with the new road and rail bridges as the most spectacular examples. We are currently examining possible changes in traffic management in the new situation created by the terrorist ceasefires. The Lagan-side Corporation is succeeding in transforming the areas along the Lagan, creating new jobs and enabling the City to enjoy the river again.

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12. Through the Making Belfast Work initiative, we have been able to target more effectively the needs of the most disadvantaged parts of the City; a further £50m will be spent over the next two years. Following the most extensive public consultation process ever undertaken, the revised strategy for MBW was launched recently by the Secretary of State with a very strong emphasis on the creation of local area partnerships, involving the public, private and voluntary sectors. We will shortly be publishing for consultation guidelines about area partnerships. I hope that the Council will let me have views on these guidelines and that Council members will play a full and constructive role in developing partnerships in the Making Belfast Work areas.

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13. Lord Mayor, much has, therefore, already been achieved. But we would be foolish to blind ourselves to the scale and complexity of the problems which remain. This is a deeply divided city. Loyalty to a neighbourhood is often stronger than pride in the City as a whole. While terrorist violence has, thankfully, ceased, the deep sectarian and community divisions remain to blight the City and threaten its future. The divisions can result in significant additional costs by creating the need for separate provision of some services and facilities which could otherwise be shared. There continue to be housing problems to be addressed - in terms of unfit and sub-standard housing and the requirements of special groups like the elderly, and those in acute

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housing need; there is also scope for increasing the private sector contribution to housing in the city. Several parts of the City do not share in the prosperity which is enjoyed by others. The levels of unemployment, especially long-term unemployed, are unacceptably high. Employment has grown in Belfast by only 1% since 1984 compared with 10% for Northern Ireland as a whole. We have much to do in protecting and enhancing the City's environment and I know of the Council's special concerns about future waste management facilities. There are grave social problems arising from the effects of an ageing population, the break up of families, the level of unemployment among young people, drugs, vandalism, crime and heavy dependence upon the State for financial support.

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14. Turning to the wider Belfast sub-
15. region, we have seen a dramatic
decline in the population of the
Belfast City Council area itself; a
drop of a third since 1971. At the
same time, there has been growth in
the Belfast Urban Area and the
adjacent towns and villages. These
changes have brought their own
problems. We are seeing an
acceleration of physical decline in
parts of "the middle city". The
16. changes are generating serious
transport problems in the outer
areas themselves and increasing
commuter traffic into the city.
All of this is also increasing
pressure on the countryside and the
quality of the environment
generally.

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15. I believe that the time is opportune to take serious stock of the changes (good and bad) which have taken place in Belfast and to reflect on the challenges which face us today and tomorrow. I want to involve the City's elected representatives and others in debate about the strategic issues involved.
16. Each city should have its own unique identity, but, in exploring Belfast's future, I believe that lessons can be learned from other major cities in Europe, North America and elsewhere. This could include cities like Glasgow, Hamburg, Pittsburg - which have had to respond to the decline of traditional industries and to redefine their purpose. It could include cities like Barcelona which have sought to re-examine their roles as regional capitals.

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