

NORTHERN IRELAND TALKS

Prime Minister's Opening Address

Let me, at the outset, welcome everyone here today.

First, the representatives of the parties who were successful in the elections ten days ago and who have demonstrated their commitment to exclusively peaceful means.

Your presence in these talks is vital - whether you come from the Unionist or the Nationalist tradition, or neither. Your success at the ballot box has confirmed your right to be here, and to participate in what, if we wish it to be so, may turn out to be an historic new start.

I also extend a warm welcome to the Taoiseach and his colleagues from the Irish Government. John Bruton has played a huge role in moving forward efforts to reach a settlement. We have not always seen eye to eye. But we have always worked together well. And we have been able to find ways through our difficulties without sacrifice of basic principle on either side and without bringing the process to a halt. This kind of cooperation is essential and I am grateful to him for it.

May I finally welcome the readiness to assist of Senator George Mitchell, General John de Chastelain and former Prime Minister Harri Holkeri. In response to our invitation, they have kindly indicated their willingness to help in those parts of the negotiations where independent chairmanship is needed. It is not an easy role but it is an indispensable one.

Today we launch a new opportunity to reach lasting peace in Northern Ireland. I believe these negotiations can give a fresh start to relations between the communities here and more widely. I hope they will prove a turning point for the better in the history of Northern Ireland.

It is not my intention to talk about the substance of the issues this afternoon. There will be a full statement of British Government views by Sir Patrick Mayhew at the appropriate moment. But I want to put these negotiations in their context.

For too long the history of Northern Ireland has poisoned the present and threatened the future. It is time to end all that however difficult it may be. History has involved too many victims. Too much blood has been spilt. For too long violence became so much a part of the political background that it almost began to be taken for granted.

Recently we have seen what a Northern Ireland without violence can be like. We can make that peace permanent.

Differences can be resolved around the negotiating table. And that is the only place they will be resolved. The table is here and now.

The road to get this far has been long and difficult. I have no illusions about the future: that too, may be difficult. But together we have overcome so many obstacles in the past and I believe we can do so again in the future. It won't be easy. But it can be done.

As we meet here today, the hopes and expectations of the people of Northern Ireland rest on your shoulders. That is a heavy responsibility. And there is no doubt the people of Northern Ireland want these talks to succeed.

They want a life that others take for granted. They want to be able to live their lives normally, free from violence and the threat of violence. They want jobs and prosperity. They want to be able to educate their children without fear. They want to live their lives without restrictions, whether in shop, cinema or pub. They want to live with their neighbours peacefully and without hatred, and to be respected whatever their beliefs or views. That isn't too much to ask. But it has been denied them for too long.

These negotiations, if successful, can restore to the people of Northern Ireland this freedom and this respect. But this depends on the skill of the negotiators, their willingness to engage in open dialogue, and their readiness to compromise where necessary to reach agreement. No-one should be afraid to compromise. It would be easy to prevent an agreement in these talks. And hard to forge one. But no-one can deny which is the better outcome. And it all depends on you.

I have no doubt too that the people of the Irish Republic share the desire for prosperity, normality and peace. I believe they too are ready to put history behind them and look forward to a new beginning based on mutual respect and accommodation.

Last but not least, the people of the rest of Britain also hope to see an end to this conflict, as long as it is based on democracy, peaceful negotiation and respect for the principle of consent. They will be following your efforts in these negotiations with close attention, and much goodwill. They want them to succeed, and expect the negotiators to do all in their power to make them succeed.

It has taken us a long time to get to the beginning of these negotiations. Some may feel it took too long. It was a frustrating process. But there was no point launching talks when it was clear that the basis of confidence, and the prospect of broad participation, simply did not exist. A huge amount of preparatory work had to be done.

This has been a very difficult process. But I believe we now have a basis on which we can build successfully. And I hope we can now move forward with all possible speed. I hope in particular that we can at last move beyond procedural arguments to tackle the underlying issues. Procedure is, of course, important. But this is not the heart of the matter. Flexibility now can build trust and confidence, and enable us to get to the centre of the problems and deal with them. That is what we must do.

I believe we can do so because of the commitment of parties and their leaders to this process over this long period of preparation. Against a background of distrust and division, that has not been easy. I pay tribute to those concerned. I trust that this

commitment can be maintained now, when it is needed more than ever.

Our aim was all-party negotiations. We have not entirely achieved that. One party which achieved success in the elections is absent through its own choice. I hope that wisdom will soon prevail, and that we will see an unequivocal restoration of the IRA ceasefire.

Without such a ceasefire Sinn Fein cannot be present at these talks. The British and Irish Governments are entirely at one on this. I also believe that we have the support of our two peoples and of the international community for this position. It will not change.

The absence of such a ceasefire, and the continuing willingness to rely on violence which it shows, is in stark contrast to the commitment to democracy and peace shown by those here today. You represent the vast majority of the Northern Ireland electorate, and I believe that the negotiations can and must be taken forward by you, whether or not others choose to join in.

I mentioned at the beginning Senator George Mitchell, General John de Chastelain and Mr. Harri Holkeri. I am grateful to them for their willingness to let us use their talents and experience. They bring not only these but also previous knowledge of Northern Ireland through their experience in the International Body on decommissioning. They will also bring absolute integrity and impartiality. I am confident they can work with objectivity and understanding. Personally I look forward to working with them.

The report for which they were collectively responsible has been of immense value in helping us to reach today's negotiations. The first act of the parties, once these opening ceremonies are over, will be to make clear their total and absolute commitment to the six principles of democracy and non violence set out in the report.

This is not an act of token symbolism, but of profound importance. It demonstrates above all that these negotiations can only be conducted on the basis of commitment to peaceful methods of resolving disputes. Negotiations inhibited by violence or the threat of violence can't be

free and fair. The bomb, the gun and the violent beating must be removed once and for all from the politics of Northern Ireland. The principles in the Mitchell report provide a way forward for this.

The Mitchell Report also proposed a practical approach to achieving the decommissioning of paramilitary arms. I endorse this approach and so do the Irish Government. We both believe it offers the way forward. The two Governments have made proposals to enable the process of decommissioning and the negotiations to proceed in parallel.

Once confidence can be established in this and other ways spelled out in the Mitchell report, the negotiations will essentially be concerned with overcoming political and other divisions, most of all between the two communities in Northern Ireland.

Democracy means a willingness to respect - and cater for - all parts of the population, and a readiness to work together. We need a settlement which not only accommodates the differences in culture,

identity and opinion in Northern Ireland, but positively celebrates them. Diversity need not mean division. I have no doubt that, despite history, there is much more in common between the communities than the disputes which currently divide them.

Let us also recognise the huge variety of opinion on both sides of the Nationalist/Unionist divide. A complex, long-standing dispute of this kind cannot be reduced to slogans or a set of simple demands by one side or the other, tempting though this may be. We must take full account of the middle ground. We must allow all shades of opinion to speak. We will fail in our efforts if we do not.

But fine words will bring neither a settlement nor a true and lasting peace. That can only come about through hard work, a readiness to listen, and a willingness to find an accommodation. I have no illusions that progress on the many thorny issues will be instant. What I do hope is that the process of discussion itself will begin to produce its own dynamic and its own goodwill. That is the way to eventual success.

The British Government, for its part, will do all it can to help the process of genuine negotiation. But we cannot impose anything on any of you, nor do we wish to. We can only try to persuade, just as you can only try to persuade. The ultimate say in the negotiations belongs to you. Only you can resolve the issues. Only you can agree an outcome.

That will not of course be the end of the process either. The outcome must be endorsed by a referendum of the people of Northern Ireland and by the British Parliament. Democratic agreement, freely arrived at, will be required at all three stages. No-one need fear that their views will be ignored or over-ridden. All will be treated equally.

Meanwhile the eyes of the world will be on the negotiations. Hopes and expectations are running high. Immense goodwill is behind the talks. But there will be bitter disappointment if we fail. The responsibility for failure would be an awesome one. For myself, I do not contemplate failure. We cannot go back to where we were.

And let us remind ourselves finally of the prize: a peaceful and prosperous Northern Ireland, and removal of the shadow this dispute has cast over the United Kingdom and the Irish Republic. The potential for development in Northern Ireland is enormous. The period of the latest ceasefire, before it was so wickedly broken, was tragically brief. But it was long enough to demonstrate the potential for inward investment, tourism and new jobs, and to reveal a potential quality of life which can be the envy of many in other parts of Britain and elsewhere. The chance of a dynamic, modern society is there to be grasped. It must not be spurned.

We have had talks in Northern Ireland before. There have been many attempts to make progress towards an agreed settlement. Hopes have been dashed on many occasions. But I believe the talks beginning today represent the best opportunity for peace in the last 25 years. I urge you all to take this opportunity with both hands. History will not forgive us if we do not.

I will now ask the Taoiseach to address you.

[After Bruton's conclusions] Thank you very much. I now propose a short adjournment, for 15 minutes or so, during which the Taoiseach and I will leave. Thereafter I will ask Sir Patrick Mayhew and Mr. Spring to resume this opening session on our behalf, with Sir Patrick Mayhew in the chair.