

John / First draft copy of your speech.
Maureen

First of all I would like start with an apology because I am afraid I have got a dreadful cold at the moment. And it has been with me for the last three of four days and it is really a bit of a nuisance. It is a nuisance to me but it was a source of considerable anxiety and concern to my good friend and Deputy Seamus Close, who was rather afraid that I might well lose my voice completely and he would have to deliver this speech himself this morning. So he phoned my wife last night and he said: "Now Joan, I want you to use your best medical ministrations to keep him in reasonable shape through until lunchtime. After that you can use your best pathological ministration if you like. But keep him ok until lunchtime." You will have to judge for yourselves how successful she has been in regards to that.

But we have come through a very interesting and different and an up and down 12 months since we last met here. Certainly, from a political point of view, the key feature of the last year was the series of talks that brought together leadership of our own party, the other three constitutional parties, representatives of the British and Irish Governments. Meeting on a very regular basis indeed over a period of six months, at Stormont, in London and of course in Dublin too.

Now these were very important discussions indeed. Because for the first time we had the full range of constitutional interests represented, spending time listening to each other, questioning each other and having to explore and have their own ideas explored by others often in, as you can imagine, a reasonably critical fashion.

I think that for very many people, whilst they didn't necessarily feel very certain that there would be a good outcome, there was a great deal of hope that there would be a good outcome. I sense in the community a great sense of sadness - even in some cases almost despair - when after all of that time, energy and commitment no resolution came forward and indeed all the evidence was that we had barely even got to the stage of negotiations. Now I understand that ??????????????those spirited response, I understand peoples despair at such an outcome.

But I do have to suggest to you that you cast your mind back to the beginning of last year and the beginning of the previous year, when others leading their political parties and representing Governments were saying to you that this was going to bring the step forward, this was going to be the decisive ?????????????????????? rouble of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, building on the Anglo-Irish Agreement or whatever their supporters wanted to hear. You will recall that despite leading the party that speaks of hope, and will find hope, I cautioned you as I cautioned other politicians and the people of Northern Ireland that they should not immediately expect too much from these talks.

I think some of you find that a little difficult. I have been thinking a lot about that over the last few months, because I have been thinking a great deal about the implications of the

breakdown of the talks. And let's be clear they didn't just come to a halt because there were elections in the Republic of Ireland. They stalled because we weren't coming close to reaching an agreement.

Now when a problem of that kind arises we blame others. You can despair, you can turn as some people have done, who have become equivocal or ambivalent, to violence, some even getting involved. Or you can sit down and reflect upon the situation and try to understand what is going on so that you can make a thorough contribution to the next step forward.

And as I have begun to think about that, I have become aware that there is an important generational change beginning to take place. I think that some of the greatest despair has been felt amongst those of you who I would describe as being part of the lucky generation. I know that many of you were involved in setting up the Alliance Party and there are some of you here I can see in the audience who have been around even before Alliance days. Working for peace and reconciliation in the third society.

Your formative years were in a time when everything was going onwards and upwards when things were getting better. There had been a terrible war and great deprivation. In the 50's going through the 60's more and more seemed possible. There was still all the old difficulties of dinosaurs, of course, but it really did seem possible that a dream could be fashioned and brought into reality which would take us way beyond these old realities.

A tremendous sense of hope galvanised people in the 1960's and into the early 1970's and Alliance was part of a worldwide movement, a whole generation of people, who I would call the 'I have a dream generation'. I call them that because they were invigorated and energised and nourished by the speeches and the ideas of people like Martin Luther King, Jack Kennedy and many others in our own community, who looked at all those old realities and said 'I have a vision of a fair and just society. Come with me and we can make it true.'

You had seen it as a vision and you committed yourselves to it and if there was a political ambition it surely was that all the various parties, and particularly the representatives of Unionism and Nationalism in Northern Ireland and their seconders and supporters outside Northern Ireland, could all be brought together at the Conference table and an agreement could be ?????????????? back which would make that dream a reality.

And I think that for people in that situation there is a great sense of disappointment. Because all of those people have been brought together and it hasn't been so simple. But I call you the lucky generation. You grew up in a time when you knew that atmosphere of optimism and hope and excitement. When you marched in those early peace marches, people like me were at school watching you on the television.

And there are others around this hall who don't even remember that time, because they are part of a new generation. A generation that has the same principles, that holds to the same policies that wants to create the same kind of fair society, has a different perspective. You see, my formative years were the years in which there was violence in Northern Ireland. I don't really remember the time when there wasn't instability and violence on the streets. I don't remember a time of peace. I don't really remember a time of optimism. And for my generation what you stand for isn't a dream its actually the only reality.

You see when my generation looks at the old realities of Unionism and Nationalism, they have seen something quite radically different. You can remember a time when Unionism seemed strong, vigorous, oppressive. Stormont was there: they had control over everything. There was no real possibility of anything more than a protest, because all the range of power and prestige and security in politics were in their hands.

Looking around I see some of you who remember those times as you will remember how difficult it was to stand out against those who seem to have all power at their disposal. Unionism then seemed something strong. Nationalism seemed a realistic alternative and that's not how it seems to me. As I talk to people of my own generation that isn't how it seems to most of us. I have been trying to spell that out to Unionist and Nationalist people in recent times. Some have a great difficulty in understanding it and I want to spend a little time making it clear to all of you here.

You see when I see Unionists, and when I listened over those months to Unionist representatives putting forward their ideas, their aims, what they want to see happening. I was filled with a sense of listening to illusions. To people who were harkening back to the time that is gone, to people who attached themselves with tremendous nostalgia to old semi imperial days. The trappings might still be around at Westminster, maybe that is why some of them are so attached to its archaic procedures and rituals. It's a kind of aristocracy of the past. There is a hope, at times an almost desperate hope, that yes some day Northern Ireland will surely be able to be governed just like any other part of the United Kingdom.

Almost oblivious of the fact how the whole of the rest of the United Kingdom will be governed is becoming increasingly uncertain. To people like us it is increasingly hopeful. But there will be a new way, a new stepping forward, a new opportunity and yet for those who hold to a nostalgia for a past that never truly was it's a difficult, dismaying and frightening future that is before them. In their hearts they know it's an illusion.

When you speak to Unionist people in the community and you say to them, 'Do you really believe that the British Government is going to change the direction that has been falling since partition? Do you really believe that the British Government in any foreseeable future is going to throw aside the wishes,

interests and aspirations of Nationalists in favour of a neo-Unionism that will bolster your position over against their interests in a broader European Community and further afield?', they smile a sad wry smile and they say of course not, we believe that Britain has already emotionally abandoned us.

When they listen to television programmes that tell them how that great imperial warrior Churchill was more than happy to try and do a deal with De Valera to sell Northern Ireland off for the sake of reneging on neutrality on the South, it eats at the whole sorry underbelly of a Unionism that holds the past. No friends, the Unionism that you faced in those days as a stout reality is now an illusion, a nostalgia, a piece of history if only people could have the courage to step out of the past.

I don't mean by that the people in this part of the world don't have every right to wish to remain part of the United Kingdom. Of course not, but Unionism means a great deal more than that wish. But you will say, that might very well be John, it might very well be that as you say the British Government sees things slipping away over quite a period of time. It might well be that they hold Northern Ireland out of duty rather than out of affection. It may well be that some of them are sad to see the old Empire go, nevertheless the ????????? Alliance that all good things come to an end and so it may be for Northern Ireland. But surely that simply means then that the wishes of Northern Ireland people will be trampled over and Nationalism will win out. Yes that is the fear of many Unionists and the wish of many Nationalists. But you see it seems to me that while Unionists are increasingly conscious of an anxiety that their reality is gone, what Unionists do not seem to understand that many Nationalists are deeply anxious that the Republic of Ireland has begun

from Northern Ireland. Many Unionists cannot understand the anxiety that some Nationalists fear, that by going into talks it is possible that the Government in the Republic of Ireland might for the sake of peace and reconciliation and the protection of the people of the South from the ravages of a violent

people from across the border might be prepared to do to them what they hoped Britain might do to the Unionists. And so they too are trying to repeat the failed approach of the Unionists. What do the Unionists do? When they were in fear they turned to the government outside the jurisdiction, the British Government, and they regarded a minority within the community as not part and not able to participate, and made them more alienated, more isolated, more humiliated until all that minority community could do was turn to violence. When in Alliance we predicted it, we spoke about it, we warned that Nationalists would find themselves turning to violence if Unionists and the British Government didn't address their needs quickly, directly and decisively we were accused of being

covert Republicans, of making excuses for the violence. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Alliance does not make excuses for anyone's violence. We simply stared reality in the face. And now we say to Nationalists. beware of putting the boot on the other foot: it will solve no problems. You could be in danger of getting an Irish Government to address your fears by backing your interests and turning the Unionist people into a alienated, isolated and humiliated minority, who would increasingly turn to violence rather than reconciliation. And you will simply have repeated all the horrible things that you yourselves experience. And when we say it what do we hear? The Alliance Party are crypto Unionists. Why? Because we make excuse for violence. Nothing could be further from the truth. We make excuse for no one's violence, we simply stare reality in the face and say it is the truth.

And what is the truth? The truth is that things have changed. And there is a generation of people growing up now to look at the reality of the way things are. They accept that the British Government does ???????? emotional attachment to Northern Ireland. And they believe that while the people in the Republic may say all sorts of fine things, the responsibility of the Republic's Government perceived and felt - and despite Articles 2 and 3 - is to the people of those 26 Counties rather than of the Island as a whole.

The reality friends, as you know and I know, is that we here inhabit this piece of ground together. That's not a dream. That's the truth. And when people on the other side of the water become more deeply distressed about a couple of young lives cut tragically short in Warrington, we understand that because we have seen it time and time and time again. And when we find that such an event deeply moves people in the Republic of Ireland, we feel hurt. Some of us say but we have had over a hundred young people gunned to death in this way. Does nobody care about our hurt?

The message is not to despise those who realise how awful violence is and who go out on peace marches and who try to waken the conscience of their community to the part they must play in peace and reconciliation. That is not the thing to do. We should welcome them. Welcome them to that community of people who are committed to a real world where we live together but who should also understand what it means. What it means is this. That the people of Britain see us a place apart from them. That the people of the Republic of Ireland also see us as a place apart. Not apart from their dreams, but apart from their real world. And the truth is that we have got to find a way of living together.

As we look towards this, there are many who would say that the message of the last 20 years has been yes indeed we must find a way of living together. If you speak to people in the Nationalist Parties, the Unionist Parties, the British and Irish Governments, they will say to you - yes of course we all

want to find a way of living together. So what's gone so terribly wrong.

Let's look at the evidence. When we think there is a problem about fair employment, what do we do? Do we ask people whether they think they are employing fairly? We know what the answer would be. We wouldn't dream of doing anything else. Do we ask people whether they are making an effort or a discriminated - there is not much point. All these other people discriminate - not you and me. What we do is look at the evidence. Look at the facts and figures. We look at reality and we find there is a problem, there has been a problem, the problem is being addressed and slowly things are improving. But we have got to keep working at it.

And what about bringing this community together. What's the evidence there? Some of you will have read some of the evidence in recent weeks of how this community doesn't live together. Of how over the past number of years, a whole way of separate living has grown up. Where people find themselves increasingly, for whatever reasons, living apart.

In other parts of the world it was called separate development. The word it became associated with was apartheid. And it didn't work. And to those who say to you the solution to the problem of Northern Ireland is to recognise these two separate approaches to life and to give each of them separately, political and symbolic and administrative representation and let them grow up separately in their own areas, with their own culture, with their own views and their own allegiance and recognise the two in separateness in perpetuity, I say to them I understand your wish. I understand that you want to hold to something of that kind, but don't kid yourself that it's going to solve any problems. That's the real dreamer's game.

The only future for a community like this is to find things we can share together. Not ways of developing separately. Not ways of one winning out over against the other. But things we can share together. Now of course some people know that is not possible. Some people will tell you that they know for sure that you can't have people that value the Irish Language and people who don't speak the Irish Language communicating at all with each other. Well the motion at the Conference last night laid the lie to that.

There are others that will say to you that Protestants and Catholics they can't live and work together especially in politics. Well some people are slow learners. If after 23 years of the Alliance Party they still aren't convinced that Protestants and Catholics can live and work together in Northern Ireland politics then there almost past learning anything about the real world.

The truth is the reality is that we are here together. The people of Britain are prepared to do their bit they tell us. Are prepared to be supportful and helpful, are certainly full of sympathy. But one other considered article?????? The people of the Republic of Ireland increasingly take the same

view. So the reality is that we are here together. So how do we deal with it. Well we have got to get back to politics. There isn't any other way of sorting this out.

The guns and bombs won't sort it out and no matter how many people vote Unionist in these elections, it won't solve the problem. And no matter how many people vote SDLP in the next election - it won't solve any problems. If 51% of the population of Northern Ireland voted to take Northern Ireland out of the United Kingdom it would not solve any problems. You would still be left with 49% of the people more alienated, isolated and humiliated than ever and feeling that their own protectors were the men of violence. Just the same as happened in the Nationalist Community. Those aren't solutions, those are illusions. The only way forward is to get back to talking. To get back to fashioning out a realistic honest honourable compromise.

Some people will tell you of course that Northern Ireland politicians are not capable of that, that they are not capable of governing Northern Ireland. Do you know, Belfast City Council in many ways hasn't a lot to be said for it. I know - I was there - and I notice that not many of the rest of you trouble yourselves to come along and observe it. I can't blame you.

But I'll tell you this. For all the crazy nonsense of Belfast City Council, if they had control of water, they wouldn't have privatised it. If they had control of electricity, they wouldn't have privatised it. If Belfast City Council was responsible for Health Services, there would be no threat over the Jubilee Maternity Hospital, there would be no trust hospitals, there would be no fund holding GP's, there would be no nonsense of a market for consumers. Because, for all the nonsense of Belfast City Council, there's a greater culture of compassion in this community than there is in the Government that governs.

I don't see any reason why we couldn't get back to talks before the Local Government Elections. I am happy for us to do so. But you know and I know that it is not realistic. The other parties are more interested in knocking lumps out of each other before May 19 than they are of finding a compromise. We accept that but perhaps I could turn to the two governments. To the Irish Government - and I listened to what Mr Spring had to say and had an early useful meeting with him recently - and I have listened to what Mr Reynolds said and I am not sure the mood music came from quite the same CD. But there we are.

But I would say to the people of the Republic. Ask the Southern Government - Do you value all the people of Northern Ireland. The British Government has made it clear that they are not prepared to act as seconds for Unionists. They are going to give attention to the needs and aspirations of all the people of Northern Ireland. That's reality - nothing has changed. But can I ask the Government of the Republic that if perhaps they could begin to look again at the ????? relationship they have developed with Northern Nationalists.

Could I ask them if they do value all the people who live on this Island. Could they perhaps expand their sensitivities to include those of us who are not Nationalists, who are not British or Irish Nationalists? Could I ask them to take serious account of all our desires and aspirations? If they want to hear from us will they listen to all of us? If they want to have somebody to speak to them directly in any sense, in the Senate, then why not invite all of them who are elected representatives of Northern opinion. All of us who are prepared to go and speak openly to them about this piece of ground that we share.

I know that some Northern Ireland Nationalists speak ?? about us. They will be frightened in the same way that Unionists were frightened when the British Government began to listen to Nationalists and to the Alliance Party. I say to the people of the South. Listen to all of us. Work with all of us and together we can fashion a future where can all respect each other.

To the British Government surely we can expect a little bit more of you than to sit back as facilitators, throwing your hands in the air and saying to the outside world aren't they terrible people. Aren't they quite impossible to deal with. Aren't we doing our best. Surely there is something more they can do. But what they are saying is surely we are trying everything. On 26 March 1991 the then secretary of State, Peter Brooke, announced in the House of Commons that the four parties and the two governments had reached an agreement for a format of talks. And you will remember what it was. Northern Ireland Parties together in Strand 1 under the Chairmanship of the British Government to try and reach an accommodation on the internal government of Northern Ireland. Although we met and talked and we talked and we walked in and out through those doors at Stormont more times than enough. And some of the times we even listened to each other. And then there was Strand 2 another historic step. Meeting with the Republic of Ireland, first in London, and then in Dublin. And from the limited feedback that the four constitutional parties got from those meetings, I think there is substantial work left to be done.

Now the four parties might be difficult to get round the table between now and May 19 but the two governments have indicated very clear their total commitment to a political programme. They want to see the talks process moving ahead. Well what better way to kick-start the talks than getting into Strand 2 immediately. Why not have the British and Irish Governments meeting together to talk about those important issues that they have to resolve. There are important constitutional questions on which I don't think they totally agree. I think they have work to do to sort some of those matters out. There are some very important questions that will remain the remit of solvent Governments no matter what kind of regional administration is sorted out for Northern Ireland. No matter what kind of North/South structures there are.

But there are none of us who believes and none of with any sense look towards, an independent Ulster. So there are going have to be parts of responsibility that will lie with the two governments. Why don't they get down to looking at that question now. There are many things they could discuss in Strand 3 of the talks process, and at the same time they could set a date for the recommencement of Strand 1 and Strand 2 when the Local Government Elections are out of the way.

Do you know if they were to do such a thing, I think it would be a tremendous encouragement to the people of Northern Ireland. I think that they would appreciate that the Peace Marches, and the calls of Warrington and in other places, and in speeches of people in Westminster and in the Dail about how important the peace process is and the encouragement from President Clinton that we have really got to get on with the work is so so important.

Well those appeals and those comments would be given an tremendously strong concrete backwall on which they based themselves if one Strand of the talks was already under way. And what harm would it do. What harm could it do to know that part of the talks process was already back in harness again.

Now I spoke earlier on about a bit of a difference in our generation. In our hopes, in our approaches but I think that you will see very clearly that in our principles and in our policies in our aims, we are saying exactly the same thing that we have always been saying. Is it a dream? No! A vision? Perhaps! But actually the only reality that any of us could possibly want for our future. We do live here together and tomorrow and the next day and the next generation we have no where else to go. This is our country. Are we going to live together or we tare elselves apart.

Lets face those realities together. Grasp those opportunities. The new generation that is coming forward, will look to you and I seem many of that younger generation around us. Some of them already elected representatives, some of them will be on May 20, and they look to you, for support, yours is the shoulder we stand to reach for that future. Your the roots that nourish us. That is the future. That is not merely a hope it is our only way forward.