

NORTHERN IRELAND FORUM FOR POLITICAL DIALOGUE

Friday 5 September 1997

The meeting was called to order at 10.04 am (Mr J R Gorman in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

DEATH OF DIANA, PRINCESS OF WALES

The Chairman: I think we all recognize that this is a very special week. Tomorrow's funeral will mark the end of a period of unprecedented national mourning for the loss of a very special young woman: a woman who in 16 years touched the hearts not just of a nation but of the world. Diana, Princess of Wales, was a unique person who had come to occupy a special position in the hearts of ordinary people, and nowhere was this more true than in Northern Ireland where her appeal was universal and transcended the normal barriers of our divided society.

As a mark of our own respect we have decided to cancel normal business today. I would like you, please, to stand and observe a minute's silence.

Members observed one minute's silence.

Motion made and Question proposed:

This Forum on behalf of the people of Northern Ireland is shocked and deeply saddened by the tragic death of Diana, Princess of Wales, and offers its heartfelt condolences and sympathy to Her Majesty the Queen, all other members of the royal family and the Spencer family. The Forum's thoughts and prayers are particularly with Prince William and Prince Harry at this distressing time. — *[The Chairman]*

Mr Trimble: It is entirely appropriate that the Forum, on behalf of all the people of Northern Ireland, should adjourn its proceedings this morning as a mark of respect for Diana, Princess of Wales, and as a way of expressing our sympathy to her sons, to the entire royal family, to the Spencer family, to the Fayed family and to the family of the driver also killed in the accident in Paris on Sunday.

Sudden death is always shocking. The tragic death of a prominent person is particularly shocking, and in view of the position that the Princess of Wales has occupied over the last year it is not surprising that the reaction throughout the country reflects people's respect for Diana personally and also reflects the role that she has played — as all members of the royal family do — in the life of our nation.

This is a reminder to us all of the way in which the royal family is one of the main elements of the cement that binds together the people of this nation. Indeed, the sympathy

that has been expressed in quarters not normally sympathetic to Britishness and the royal family shows that those feelings are shared throughout the community in Northern Ireland.

Princess Diana has, of course, left us her sons, and Prince William will, in time, succeed to the throne of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland — or we trust that he will. She has also left other things which mark her work, her charity work in particular, and that is something that people have dwelt upon when considering her contribution. We think of her work with AIDS sufferers, the homeless and victims of land-mines — to name but three groups. The persistence with which she pursued these causes clearly reflects a prompting which was genuine altruism, and she clearly made more of an impact on the public mind than any figure from politics or the arts.

We particularly recall her visits to Northern Ireland — to Enniskillen, with Prince Charles, in the wake of the Remembrance Day bombing; to the Ulster Hospital and Hillsborough with Home-Start in 1993. Twice she visited Belfast as President of Barnardo's. In 1985 she went to the Carrigfoyle Support Unit, which helps young children with disabilities and their families, and in 1991 to PACT, Parent and Child Together, at the Windsor Avenue family resource centre as well as to the Appleby social education centre in Armagh. She also visited troops at Ebrington Barracks in Londonderry.

In carrying out those activities she brought a distinctive flavour to her position as a member of the royal family. Some people have used the phrase "breaking the mould". That is, perhaps, going a little too far, but she certainly gave the Palace and the royal family a more youthful face. But in doing that she was actually continuing a particular tradition, for it was by taking a bold and active role in controversial causes, by making judicious, symbolic interventions and advancing tolerance by personal example that the Victorian monarchy affirmed its position at the apex of civil society, complementing but separated from those exercising political rule. That was the prime achievement of Prince Albert, another outsider, who had a chance for greater success than the princess and whose early death recalls some of the feeling of wasted promise present in the country today.

We cannot, however, recall that waste without also recalling the circumstances that caused it. I do not wish to dwell on that, but I do feel that there has to be a very serious rethink about how the media treat prominent persons in the royal family and elsewhere — a very serious rethink — and I notice that Earl Spencer has again reflected his view of these matters. But it is inappropriate to dwell on those aspects of the situation today. That is for another day.

Today as we recall the wasted promise, we recall not just that wasted promise but also the very special contribution that she made to the whole of the United Kingdom and beyond in her work.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I would like to associate myself and my party colleagues with Mr Trimble's statement. I do not intend to cover the same ground that has been ably covered by him.

On another occasion in the Forum I said that great grief is not great at talking. What we say here is not what matters; what matters is how we really feel, and on the streets and at

the places where books of condolence have been opened we have seen just how people feel. All who have been expressing their sympathy at this time have shown just how deeply they want to give thanks for the princess.

Death catches up with us all; it has been called “the king of terrors and the terror of kings”. When a young life is cut off in the circumstances in which the princess’s life was, there is a sobering effect on everyone. The nation and, indeed, the world has recognized that, and we should all be very proud that a member of the royal house had such an influence across the world.

There are those — and I am not going to enlarge on this — who would try to use this incident as a means of attacking the monarchy and our Queen. That is totally and utterly unfair. When sorrow has come to my home, I have not wanted to meet people; I have wanted to be alone with my family; I have wanted to be there with them. And I can well understand why the Queen wanted to be in Balmoral, in a place which, at this time of the year, is always her home. It is unfair for people to say “We can jostle Her Majesty into doing things.” That is not fair at all. She is a mother; she is a grandmother; and she has all the feelings that any other mother and grandmother have.

When Mr Major made the announcement in the House of Commons about the break-up of the royal marriage, I made a brief contribution then. I said that the people who should have our love and prayers more than anyone else were the two princes, and I repeat that today. It is they who have the hardest burden to bear and the hardest weight to carry. I trust that the press will not harass them as they have harassed other public figures in the past. These young boys had already seen their parents parted and the marriage union broken. Now they have seen their mother so sadly and tragically removed from them.

10.15 am

I wish to associate myself with Mr Trimble’s remarks. Other families were also bereaved at this time — the driver’s family, whom we have heard very little about, and the Fayed family too. Of course, they have pain like anyone else. Their tears are just as poignant as anyone else’s and their sorrow just as real as anyone else’s. But the people who should now be safeguarded and helped are the two princes. They are her greatest legacy to the nation, and in them she will live on. And I trust that at this time those advising Her Majesty will seek to bring these young princes up in such a way that they will really be a part of this nation and will be taken, as I believe they have been already, to the heart of everyone in it.

I was thinking of a few words today about mothers, and especially about Diana as a mother:

“Sorrow broods upon the blackened wing;
 Death has come with his cruel sting;
 Hearts are bleeding, pleading, and crushed,
 While rooms are darkened and voices hushed.
 A mother sleeps, and a world of care
 Has passed from the brow of marble there;
 And the sweet, white lips are closed for aye,
 Heedless, at last, to the children’s cry.

But night has fallen, the day is done,
 And sorrow reigns on his dread, black throne.
 'Mother is dead!' ... [the sons do] cry,
 And hollow echoes go hurrying by.
 Oh! who can tell of a mother's love?
 Who can measure, save God above?
 And who can tell of a mother's loss,
 But those who bear that heavy cross."

Today, as the princes bear that heavy cross, we would like in our own way to help them to carry it.

Lord Alderdice: In all our lives many a week comes and goes unremembered. Then there are those which seem long and which make a remarkable impact. The week has been one of them.

This time last week Princess Diana was lively, vivacious, the centre and focus not only of attention but of excitement everywhere she went and in everything she did. Then, as Sunday morning dawned and the news began to come through of the terrible tragedy which had befallen her and her friends, all of us began the struggle to come to terms with the dreadful, devastating tragedy, something which we felt affected all of our lives very deeply. As the week has proceeded, the extraordinary nature of that tragedy has not diminished in any way. All of us have felt caught up in the terrible sadness which has swept not only across our own country, but right across the world in a quite remarkable and, I think it is safe to say, in a quite unprecedented way.

We have watched what has gone on with a mixture of feelings. With terrible sadness we have, in many cases, participated in remembrances of and reflections on her life, signed books of condolence and felt ourselves moved in a quite extraordinary way, and that is something that we have shared. It has already been commented on this morning — and here I want to identify myself with the things that have been said by Mr Trimble and Dr Paisley — that this is something that has been shared right across our community. Many who would not easily identify themselves with things British, with the monarchy or whatever, nevertheless felt, in a very deep and real way, moved. In some ways this has brought our people together, and I am sure that that is something she would have wanted to see.

I have found myself also reflecting on why it might be that we have felt so caught up in this way. I suppose, in many senses, we feel that she epitomized so many things that are ideals and that we would like to see. Of course, she was a beautiful and attractive woman who went from relative obscurity to being known throughout the world and admired greatly. She was someone who carried herself with great grace, someone who not only could find ways of enjoying life even when things were difficult, but could be touched and was able to express her upset and her sadness when others were in difficulties. That is something which, I suppose, we all identify as a great ideal, and something we would wish to identify with, so when she is taken away, it is not only that she as a person is taken away.

We would all like to feel that we knew her, but even those who met her frequently — and I was not fortunate to be one who met her frequently — will only have known her in a

superficial way. We really did not know what it was like for her in the happiest times or in the long, dark, difficult and lonely nights that befell her life also. But we like to feel that we knew her. She was so ever present in the papers, in the magazines and on the television that we felt that we knew her. When she was taken away, therefore, we felt that we had lost something enormous — and indeed we have.

But what we did know of her and what we did see of her was someone who, in spite of her elevated position, wanted to identify with those who were on the margins of society. She, who lived in palatial circumstances, wanted to identify with those who had no roof over their head; she, who was the picture of life, wanted to identify with those who were suffering from terminal and incurable illnesses; she, who was the epitome of beauty and attractiveness, wanted to identify herself with the mutilated, whether by the wickedness of man with land-mines or by the ravages of illness like leprosy. She wanted to identify herself in that way.

So, as we and the whole community suffer in grief and express that grief in the next few days, I am sure it will be right that, as we remember her, our thoughts also go to those who are never remembered, that, as we mourn her, we remember those whose lives will come and go with no mourning because they are marginalized — the ill, the deformed and the homeless. It would be a most fitting remembrance of her if our minds were to turn to those with whom she identified herself.

As has been pointed out, our minds must surely turn to the two young princes and, indeed, to the others of the family circle and the family circles who have also been struck with grief.

The princess's own life was touched with tragedy from an early stage. Her own parents' marriage broke down, and that led to great sadness for her. Although she sought happiness and pleasure, it is clear that there was much tragedy in her own life, and it is the final tragedy of her death that we remember now. Surely we must hope, we must work, we must restrain our own wish to know and to see in such a way that the tragedy of her life is not repeated in her children's lives. Already they have experienced much sadness. Already they have experienced the parental marriage which has broken down. As has already been said, we must hope and pray and restrain ourselves in such a way that in her memory we do not do damage to the lives of Prince William and Prince Harry, on whom so much depends.

Ms Sagar: I should like to associate my party with the words that have already been spoken.

It is very difficult to express one's feelings at this time. She was a young and very vibrant woman who touched the hearts and souls of many. She helped those who needed help the most and gave hope to many. People throughout Northern Ireland, throughout the nation and throughout the world will always remember Princess Diana.

While her two sons are alive she will never die. Nobody is truly dead until one forgets them. Our hearts are with those young men at this time, with the Spencer family, with the royal family and with all those who have lost people this week in tragic accidents. It is very hard when we watch television — and we are constantly being shown pictures of

Diana — to realize that she has passed away. That is the hardest thing about it all. Most of us, when we see people on television, believe that they will always be there. We do not imagine that anything can ever happen to them: that has been the biggest shock to everybody. We expected this young, vibrant woman to live forever and to continue touching those people who needed her the most. However, with the remarks already made and the tributes paid to her from throughout the world, it is clear that her memory will live on.

I reiterate that our hearts are with those two young men at the moment, and always will be. The nation will mourn with them for a long time to come.

Mr Hugh Smyth: I too, on behalf of my party, would like to associate myself with the views which have already been expressed. It is a very distressing time for us all. What can one say? I could use the little phrase with which I usually start my speeches and say that I am going to be very brief. Unfortunately Diana's life was very brief, but it was long enough to touch so many people. She once said that she would never become queen in her lifetime. Little did she know that she would die the queen of all of our hearts.

The enormous amount of sympathy that has been shown is understandable. The reason for it is that we looked upon her as one of us. In spite of her privileged position, the vast majority of people considered that she did understand. She was one of the few who attempted to understand, and she did that very successfully.

I agree that our thoughts should be very much with Prince William and Prince Harry and, of course, we should not forget all the other people who were bereaved in this tragic accident. I am sure everyone will join with me in hoping that the sole survivor of this accident will make a full and speedy recovery, both mentally and physically.

It is wonderful to be able to pick up the papers and read the tremendous stories about Diana, about her loving and her caring. It saddens me that those same people who wrote those stories hunted this beautiful young lady for years and years — they did contribute to her death, no matter what anyone says. I know that this is neither the time nor the place, as Mr Trimble has already said, but it is a pity that some of those people did not give her the roses, did not give her the flowers, while she was living.

I agree with Dr Paisley that the treatment that has been handed out to Her Majesty the Queen over the past few days has been absolutely deplorable. I see it as the anti-Royalist lobby taking advantage of death — how low can some people get? Those of us who are fortunate enough — and I know that quite a few here are — to have met Her Majesty the Queen can state quite clearly and categorically that she is a loving and caring person. It was only right and proper that her place, following this terrible tragedy, was with those two boys. That is where any grandparent would have been, and that is what the Princess of Wales would have wanted. I only hope and pray that we can all learn from this.

We have seen that the princess was a very caring person, and one of the greatest things we could do now is try that little bit harder over the next 12 months to pull our community together as she has done in death. I was in the city hall yesterday and by 4 o'clock approximately 15,000 people had signed the books of condolence. They came from every walk of life. One has only to flick through the pages to see that as many people from

the Falls Road signed those books as people from the Shankill or from east or south Belfast. That is the tribute that we should all be thinking of offering Diana: we should, all of us, redouble our efforts to try to pull our community together in life, as she did in death.

10.30 am

Mr John White: On behalf of my party, I should like to associate myself with all of what other Members have said and offer our deepest sympathy and condolences to the royal family, the Spencer family and, in particular, to the families of the other people who were killed in that tragic accident. Our thoughts are also with the person who is fighting for his life.

It is quite clear that this death has touched not only our nation but others too — most people throughout the world are grieving. This is one of the most tragic deaths that has occurred in my lifetime, and we have witnessed many similar deaths in Northern Ireland. I want to offer my deepest sympathy, once again, to the royal family, the Spencer family and to all the family members of those who were killed and injured in that accident.

The Chairman: I have been given the task of summing up. This is not easy to do, and I am not going to attempt to recapitulate the most eloquent, most moving things which have been said by all who have spoken this morning.

There are some things which stick in my mind. One such is the note that was struck in Armagh last night by Archbishop Eames: there has never been, and probably never will be in our lifetimes again, such an outpouring of grief and love as there has been throughout the United Kingdom — indeed, throughout the world. We are going to look back on this time as one of enormous importance, and we will remember where we were when we heard the news.

The emphasis of everyone who has spoken has been on the enormous challenge which is being faced by the two young princes — Prince William and Prince Harry. It is impossible to believe that we are suddenly going to find a total abnegation by the paparazzi — and their employers — of the intrusiveness which hounded our dear Princess Diana. One just hopes that some means can be found to control the activities of those media people. What they have been saying in the last few days and their attacks on Her Majesty the Queen have been quite in keeping with that intrusiveness, and they are the same people who employ the paparazzi. We have seen how public opinion can come forcefully to people's attention and can cause changes to be made. Let us see if public opinion cannot continue to protect them.

Just one little thought about Prince William: those of us here in Ulster can take heart from, can take pride in, the fact that the man who is going to be immensely important to him for a lot of his time — two-thirds of his year, mostly at school — is an Ulsterman, Andrew Gailey. He and his wife Shauna are from Londonderry. They will have an influence on him which will be very good indeed, and we should think of them in our prayers too.

The books of condolence have been filled. I have seen my own book in Killyleagh Castle filled with names of people from every walk of life. It was quite interesting to see many names that did not mean anything to me, but the expression with them "Rest in Peace"

indicated, in Ulster terms, where they had come from, and there were masses of names such as those.

There is really little more that I can do — in fact, in some ways I feel that I have exceeded my position. The media have been asking me all week to say something because I am known, as a CVO, to have some connection to the Royals. I met this beautiful young woman twice — she was even more beautiful in the flesh than in the pictures — but I cannot say for a moment that I was any sort of friend of hers. But I do think that she has given an example to our young people of the way life can be led, partly in pursuit of pleasure — and let us face it, the young are in pursuit of pleasure — but also enormously in concern for other people.

Someone I do know, Rosa Monckton, says that the princess was happier during those brief few days they had on their own in the Mediterranean than she had ever seen her, and she has known her all her life. Rosa has a Down's syndrome child to whom Princess Diana was godmother and to whom she was very good — she spent a lot of time with her. That sort of example will be followed by other members of the royal family, and I know that recollections of her will be an inspiration, particularly to her sons.

It would be good for the Record of our proceedings today to be produced as quickly as possible so that copies can be sent to the royal family and the Spencer family. Following what has been said by Members, we should also send messages of condolence to the Fayed family and to the family of the driver. In addition, we should send a message of goodwill and sympathy to Mr Rees-Jones, the security man in the vehicle.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

This Forum on behalf of the people of Northern Ireland is shocked and deeply saddened by the tragic death of Diana, Princess of Wales, and offers its heartfelt condolences and sympathy to Her Majesty the Queen, all other members of the royal family and the Spencer family. The Forum's thoughts and prayers are particularly with Prince William and Prince Harry at this distressing time.

The Forum was adjourned at 10.38 am.