

- Party leader
Speeches.

SPEECH BY PARTY LEADER

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WORKING FOR THE FUTURE

As we come together at the beginning of our twentieth year, to rededicate ourselves to the principles upon which our party was founded, we do well to consider our past, and indeed to celebrate it with some pride. Our party has a noble history. It is the twentieth century political expression of that third tradition in Northern Irish life. The embodiment of the same radical, democratic spirit which imbued those in every generation who have stood out against the racialism that sets one section of our community against the other. We are kindred with all who down the troubled years have fought for civil and religious liberty in this land. And when we are forced, in any particular situation, to choose between one group of our fellow men and another, we choose not on ties of blood or birth. We choose to stand with the one who is being wronged, oppressed or discriminated against; the one whose human dignity is at stake; that is our tradition.

It is not a stand that brings easy success, though there have been times when we have been on the crest of the wave; we have shared in government and seen our policies implemented. Then there have been other times, particularly in the earlier part of this decade when we have been through the fiercest of testing. But spirit and fortitude are not evidenced by the capacity to be carried along the high tide of success. Rather they are best judged by the ability to negotiate the dangerous and the unsettled waters, and when the tide is on the ebb to keep the barque afloat in spite of rocks and wreckers. We have weathered the storms. Now I firmly believe the tide is on the turn, and we must look to the future, for if our Northern Irish community can be said to have one overwhelming weakness, it is our tendency to look only at the past and fail to see the future.

In a most fascinating way, the past and the future are about to come together. Although in recent times our communal experience has been moulded by being part of a world-wide British Empire, our more distant past was shaped by our being a part of Europe, and with the advent of the European Community our future again lies with our European neighbours. We no longer live in a bipolar world, with Europe straddling an uneasy 'no man's land' between the superpowers of the United States

and the Soviet Union. Today, the Muslim world flexes its collective muscle, for good and for ill; the black African states find common cause on many issues; the Pacific basin is a further focus of power and of struggle; and an evolving European Community with the economic and political clout of 320 million citizens speaks with an increasingly concordant voice. The international stage is set with a multipolar cast of players and in this new drama the notion of a truly independent nation state becomes a relic of a past scenario.

The direction in which history is taking us has been graphically illustrated during the Government's recent privatisation campaign. When all of the agreements have been reached, and the Government and private companies have clinched the deal, the final word goes to the European Commission and if, as in the case of Rover, the Commission is not satisfied, the deal will be reviewed and altered in accordance with their ruling. That is why, when I became convinced that the only real hope for the future of Harland and Wolff Shipyard was an industrial partnership between management and employees, I lobbied Mr Viggers and Mr King, I spoke to M.P.'s at Westminster and I raised the matter with the Prime Minister, but I also spoke to the European commissioner for Industrial Affairs, Mr. Martin Bangemann. I spoke with him, because along with Commissioner Sir Leon Brittan, he will have to look at the package of proposals. I also spoke with him because he is a leading German Liberal and in times like these when the well being of our people is at stake, I believe that we should grasp every opportunity to win friends and support for our province. Some may choose to use the platform of the European Parliament to publicly spew out the stagnant venom of an old hatred, but only the omnipotence of the paranoid could make a virtue out of the isolation which comes from being without friends and without influence. Our future is in Europe, and it is ironic that some of those who most fervently celebrate the intervention of a European prince in the affairs of our nation, should now wish to isolate us from those same influences three hundred years later.

Perhaps some of the fear is a fear of European centralism. Let me make it clear that I am opposed to European centralism. I want to see a Europe of the regions, where we can proudly maintain our regional heritage, but contribute to, and be enriched by, the interdependence of the whole

Community. We are not going to see Imperial London replaced by Imperial Brussels. Our community is a coming together of mutual respect. The Luxembourgers have their place alongside the mighty Germany. Denmark has as much dignity as France. I believe that this appreciation of unity in diversity is also what Mr Gorbachev is trying to achieve in the once monolithic Eastern bloc. It is ironic that when he and Mrs Thatcher met this week he was representing an old Empire which now promotes glasnost and perestroika with the realisation that a stable healthy community is not to be found in extending central control over every aspect of our lives; whilst the Prime Minister, like an incarnation of Britannia, travels the waves and airways searching for a diplomatic empire of personal influence.

She has centralized power at Westminster, she has personally taken charge of the Health Review, the sale of water and the fight against terrorism. But in spite of all of these attempts to personally control everything and everyone, Northern Ireland's misery continues. The Scots talk of bringing government back to Edinburgh, and there is seething, if as yet uncoordinated discontent in the regions. Are we to expect that since Mr Moynihan has extended the remit of the Sports Ministry, the Prime Minister will now take over the appointment of research assistants for Members of Parliament? The whole thing becomes absurd.

We do not want to replace Mrs Thatcher's centralism with European centralism. We want to see a united, but decentralised Europe. A federal community of free and caring citizens. The completion of the internal market by 1993, the construction of the Channel Tunnel and the almost inevitable movement towards closer European integration will lead to major economic developments and to many new jobs. We need to combat the negative image of our province and give a positive presentation of the needs of our people if we are to get our full share of this growth. Northern Ireland needs to show Europe a new face at the European Parliament and with your help between now and June, I hope to be that new face.

With such exciting opportunities available to us, I can understand those who react with anger and frustration to the parochialism of some parties and difficulty of creating political progress in Northern Ireland. I have

sympathy with the exasperation which says, 'away with local parties - give us a chance to vote for parties from the rest of the United Kingdom who at least live in the twentieth century'. I appreciate that almost in despair, some people hope that by changing the framework, and looking at the problem through a Westminster spyglass, the centuries of feuding can be ended. It is an attractive thought, and I have never regarded it as objectionable that anyone from any democratic party should stand before the people. But I believe it is naive to think that this is, in itself, a solution to our problems, for it ignores the fact that the very essence of our problem is that one section of our community looks to Dublin rather than London.

But let us examine this question of integration a little further. Does putting all one's eggs in the Westminster basket help a provincial region? Ask the Scots. Ask them whether they find that being in the Palace of Enchantments has prevented the imposition of the poll tax. Ask them what they think of the ravaging of the particularly humane, Scottish Health Service. Ask them how much influence they had in the decisions which were made about the revenue from Scottish off-shore oil. Ask them whether they want to give up their own legal system, their own legislative framework, their own church, whether they want full integration, and see what answer you get. What I hear is that they want a say in their own affairs. They want power in Scottish hands. They want devolution. They want government with consent. And that is what I want for Northern Ireland.

It is not that I am critical of everything the Government has done. Credit is due for the revitalization of Belfast City Centre, and for the personal intervention of the Secretary of State in bringing Montpet to the province. Many of us welcome the new office and retail developments which are springing up in our towns and cities, and the Government can rightly take some credit for this. But at a national level, interest rates are on the up, crippling people who took the government's advice and invested in their own homes. Inflation is rising too, hitting hardest those who have the least, and our chronically high level of unemployment leaves communities resentful, and individuals powerless and frustrated. Whatever the merits of this Government's policies when applied to the South East of England there are major problems in applying them to in a

small, peripheral province with a long history of deprivation. That is why we put forward a non-doctrinaire package of measures designed to build on our agricultural base, to develop our infrastructure, to protect our heavy staple industries and to encourage indigenous small business enterprises.

However, the conditions necessary for human health, happiness and development require more than an economic improvement. Our environment is a precious and non-renewable resource, and as we look to our own future and to the generations to come, concern for the stewardship of natural resources must inform all our policies. The acid rain destruction of European lakes and forests from dirty British chimneys, the frightening implications of Chernobyl and the results of the Rhine pollution disaster show the futility of purely national attempts to protect our environment. That is why we proposed the establishment of a European Community Environmental Early Warning Unit which would monitor both chronic pollution and environmental catastrophes. This idea has been taken up by our European partners and is included in our joint European manifesto. Of course improvement in the environment is not merely a question of international agreements. As a party we will not only continue to press the minister to make his department live up to its name, but will also use our influence on the local councils to ensure that responsible and imaginative decisions are taken on refuse disposal, recycling and the control of CFC's.

When the education minister published his new proposals for Education reform and invited comment I think that many people were sceptical that he would be prepared to make changes, but I have to say in all fairness that after the period of consultation the changes that he made to the government's proposals were welcome evidence that the minister had been listening, and most notably from our point of view, on integrated education. That was good, and it was a vindication of our party's campaigning down the years, but I feel that I must express my concern about the enormous number of changes which have taken place in a very short time; examinations, curricula, rationalisation of resources and new conditions of service. A system can only cope with a certain amount of change at any one time, and I fear that the barrage which has been thrust upon teachers in recent years, sometimes, I believe, without a full

appreciation of the problems which will be caused, is leaving them punch-drunk and demoralised.

Another area where Government policy is especially worrying is in the White Paper on Broadcasting. It would seem that the Government sees broadcasting simply as entertainment and if deregulation is carried as proposed, and the driving force is nothing but the untrammelled materialism of market forces, we may see the disappearance of much that we now know as public service broadcasting. It is my belief that if the Government proceeds with its stated intention to offer broadcasting franchises to the highest bidder, without a real acknowledgment of local interests, quality of programming or the educative and informing aspects of public service broadcasting, we will have the growth of a superficial tabloid mentality amongst the new wave of international franchisees whose sole interest and consideration will be the production of the best financial return.

But of all the areas where the application of supermarket economics should cause us concern, none is more disturbing than the proposed onslaught on the health of the nation, so recently unveiled by Health Minister Kenneth Clarke. Rarely has there been such a consensus of concern across all professional boundaries. Again it is not that every proposal is wrong, but it is sadly characteristic of this government that the honest and experienced concerns of doctors, nurses, paramedics and patients are dismissed as alarmist, self-interested clap-trap. Audit and performance assessment is perfectly acceptable, if it is a true assessment of the human value of the work done. But what happens when economic assessments conflict with human values? How will this system respond when faced with the reality that it makes bad economic sense to continue treatment of a child with cystic fibrosis because of the cost. How do you assess the productivity of a hospice? Sometimes the conflict in the Government's own stated aims is quite glaring. Let me give you an example of a proposal which is intended to encourage high levels of immunization in the community to ensure so-called herd immunity from particular diseases. As an incentive, it has been proposed not to pay general practitioners for their immunizations at all unless they reach certain high rates of immunization. However, research demonstrates that in areas of great deprivation, where health risks are highest, it is virtually

impossible to achieve these high levels of immunization. This will mean that GP's who work in areas of greatest need will have an enormous financial disincentive to immunize children, because they will be quite unable to reach the targets regardless of effort. GP's in middle class areas on the other hand, have little trouble reaching the targets and will be paid for it. In other ways too I believe, the whole thrust of the White paper has not been thought through. The proposal for self governing hospitals and the associated changes in pay and conditions of service will jeopardise the services to the chronically ill and the development of real community care. Unchallenged, these proposals are the beginning of the end of the National Health Service.

In all these areas, the economy, environment, education, health and social services, we want the chance, not just to comment on, but to contribute to the running of our own community. For us the opportunity is not available because participatory democracy has disappeared in Northern Ireland.

For too long when local Northern Irish politicians acted irresponsibly, the Government reacted by removing responsibility from them. That was not unreasonable given the circumstances. Indeed in the short term no government could have done much else. But in the long term the results have been serious for the politics of Northern Ireland. Removing responsibility does not in itself make people more responsible. On the contrary, like the patient who has been in bed too long, the skills of self-care become lost. The muscles which should be strong enough to take the strain of responsibility have wasted away. The patient has become a demanding, complaining, insatiable child. Most of an entire generation of Northern Ireland politicians have spent their whole political lives without ever having to take responsibility for the compromises, and the hard decisions of government. It would be easy to accuse such political leaders of wanting to avoid responsibility, but perhaps that would not be entirely fair. It may well be that the events of the last twenty years have sapped their confidence. They may not feel up to the job.

That is why I was not too surprised by the response I received two weeks ago when I called on the Secretary of State, to convene a meeting of the legal affairs spokesmen of the constitutional parties. I am sure that like

me, you were able to quickly see who was prepared to be responsible, and who was more comfortable with complaining. That call was of course borne out of an anger with the continual needless loss of human life which we suffer from in this sad little place. When I get angry about something like that, I don't want to just complain about it, I want to do something about it, and so I want to ask those in all the other constitutional parties who claim that they want control of security back in the hands of the people of Northern Ireland (and every other major constitutional party has said that) 'Do you want to do something constructive or just continually complain? How do you expect to demonstrate that you would be capable of responsibility and the necessary cooperation if you were given some measure of control?'

But the call I made was also motivated by an appreciation that whilst one can glibly call for 'stronger' security policies, the dependence on more and more draconian measures can be counter-productive and will eventually lead to a loss of freedom for us all. In some senses the terrorist has already won by causing us to seek to destroy the very democracy we are striving to protect. That is one reason why Ian Paisley has always been consistent in his opposition to internment being applied to Loyalist areas. He knows the dreadful effects it would have on his community.

Meantime the killing goes on and on, and with the twentieth anniversary of the arrival of the troops, with the reorganisation of the UDA and with the change over to a new Chief Constable, I fear that the frightening spiral of tit-for-tat sectarian killings will continue, and in the run-up to the two elections this may well be added to by various staged events calculated to bring terror, misery and anguish to ordinary people and to put pressure on the long-suffering security forces. These men and women whether on or off duty and even if retired, walk in daily danger of their lives to keep us a little safer. That is a debt this community can never fully repay, and I wish to pay tribute to their courage, to assure them of our continued support, and to call on all other constitutional parties to give them that same support, without equivocation.

There are always areas where security can be improved but what is required is not just 'stronger' security but a programme of political action which can undermine the men of violence. The Provisional IRA realise

this and that is why they embarked, through Sinn Fein, on a 'hearts and minds' campaign. The democratic answer to the 'armalite and the ballot paper' must be firm security and political progress.

We have never shied away from a firm implementation of the rules of law. We know that the price of participatory democracy is the protection of the constitutional process, and that part of that price is the renunciation of violence. It is not possible for the process of democracy to function whilst one is at the same time exercising the option of resigning about change through violence or the threat of violence and bloodshed.

Sinn Fein is not the only organisation which has attempted to square this particular circle. Unionists have organised private armies, threatened to make Ulster ungovernable, and launched attacks on the police, but the appearance of Sinn Fein representatives in the council chamber has created serious difficulties for local government. That is why we urged the Government to bring forward legislation which would require all those who sought elected office to make a prior renunciation of violence. We did not harbour any illusion that men and women who were willing to kill and maim would be deterred from adding perjury to their list of ignominies, but we proposed a course of action which we believed, and still believe would create enormous and increasing difficulties for the supporters of terrorism. We did not suggest that a breach of the declaration should be made a criminal offence for that would have had implications for the rules of evidence required, however, we did propose that the government, through the Attorney-General should shoulder the responsibility for enforcing the declaration. It is always the primary responsibility of government to provide for the security of the community, both from outside attack and destruction from within.

This Government has always portrayed itself as robust in its defence of democracy. On this question however, the decision of the government to push responsibility for taking actions against the henchmen of the terrorists on to private individuals who are vulnerable is both lamentable and reprehensible. The government has wasted an opportunity to deal a serious blow to the policy of 'the armalite and the ballot paper', and I can have no enthusiasm for supporting a measure which has been so weakened as to be in danger of being counter-productive.

These two experiences, of both local political leaders and the government failing to take full responsibility for progress here, must influence us as we continue to work for the future of our people. When I was elected as Party Leader, I said two things. Firstly, that I would work to help rebuild the channels of political communication, and secondly that the period of the Review of the Anglo-Irish Agreement was the best opportunity for some time for political progress. The experience of the Duisberg Process has demonstrated that there are senior politicians in all the democratic parties, who are earnest in their desire to see progress towards peace and stability, but it also showed that there are others who are much less certain about the desirability of that sort of change. When I suggested that the joint meeting which the other party leaders had with the Prime Minister about the shipyard, could be a model for fuller cooperation, I was told by some of those involved that they did not have any confidence that they could achieve anything of the kind.

If they say they cannot use such an opportunity, then I must accept that it is the case, but I think I am entitled to ask the question why? Is it because of lack of imagination, or confidence, is it that there is no appetite for government, is it historical paralysis. If I am asking that question, I am sure that there must be many others who are asking it too. Where are these leaders going? What are they prepared to do to get us out of this mess? Do they know themselves? What proposals do they have? If they will not or cannot move, whatever their reason, if there is to be no grasping of the nettle by local politicians, then it is not enough for the Government to say that the people must simply wait for the Northern Ireland political leaders to resolve their differences. The Government has its responsibilities and must take the lead.

It has been made clear that the policy of the present government is devolution for Northern Ireland. In every other area where this Government has declared its policy, in Health, Defence, the Economy, Education, Industrial Relations, and Broadcasting, there has been no delay in bringing forward legislation for the implementation of the particular policy. So how is it that almost four years after the policy of devolution was enshrined in an international agreement we see no government initiative in this area. In the early 1970's when Mrs

Thatcher's predecessor Edward Heath was Prime Minister, the government took control. It made proposals openly and publicly. It carried them through Parliament, giving an opportunity for discussion and consultation, and it established a power-sharing executive. I believe that this Government should begin to work towards a reasonable initiative after the two upcoming elections. Of course even in 1971 not everyone wanted to be a part of that government, but there is a difference between everyone having the opportunity to be involved in a partnership government, and the whole system having to be dependent on everyone agreeing to take part. Those who do not take part in a reasonable arrangement will then have to take their argument to the people at the ballot box.

That day, when we will be involved in government as we were in 1974, never seemed as far away as it did in the autumn of 1987, when I addressed you as your newly elected Party Leader. Many able people were withdrawing from politics. Local government was in disarray. The British and Irish Governments were at daggers drawn. The lines of political communication had almost completely broken down and the outlook for political progress seemed bleak. These first two years have not been easy times. Frequently, when one has tried to open the door to discussion someone else has slammed it shut. But I believe that perhaps we are beginning to see the first stirrings of a movement which may presage a major political development. There is evidence that within all the parties there are those who do seriously want to see progress towards devolution. I am hopeful that if, after the elections are over, the Government takes the lead, those who want to work for the future will find ways of picking up the strands.

In the next two months we have two elections to fight. I believe that in these elections we have an opportunity to take a significant step forward. I am a realist. I do not expect some kind of cataclysmic change, but I believe that we are going to send back into the council chambers of this province a stronger team than we have had for a long time. Northern Ireland needs people who will stand up for what is right, expose what is wrong and build for the future. This is not an easy task, nor is it popular with everyone.

I understand that we have been described as a band of juvenile delinquents. Well I feel no shame at being young. And if it is delinquent to refuse respect to traditions which incite hatred and keep enmity alive, if it is delinquent to go around tearing down every edifice of bigotry, destroying every last vestige of prejudice and discrimination then I plead guilty. Guilty for my own part, guilty by association with you, unpenitently guilty. With such juvenile delinquents lies hope for the future. But for the senile delinquency which looks only to the past, wastes the present and squanders the future because it has no investment in it, there is nothing up ahead, just the failures of yesterday repeated over and over again.

Twenty years ago Terence O'Neill asked the people of Northern Ireland, 'What kind of Ulster do you want?' Well, I know what kind of Ulster I want and it's not the one I see now. I want a province that is proud of its diverse heritage. People working side by side in mutual respect. Children with something to look forward to.

If you've got better things to do, that's fine, but if after 20 years of carnage you are saying, 'Stop this crazy nonsense! I want to start working for tomorrow', then join me, join us. The future is ours - let's take it.