

## SPEECH FOR ST MARY'S

As we approach the Millennium, we are at an <sup>a evening</sup> exciting point in our history where we are now making choices about a new way forward in Northern Ireland. And that is what I want to talk about <sup>tonight</sup> today. How do we embrace change? How do we learn to build new ideas into our lives, ~~not just in terms of the personal and educational development that you have experienced during your time at St. Mary's,~~ but also how are we to come to terms, even indeed to appreciate, the enormous changes that have been happening here in this country over the past year.

In recent times we have learned about the need to build a pluralist society that respects our diversity – one in which we can be different together. Different and equal. We have also learned that here in Northern Ireland we are all interdependent, one on another. We cannot exist without our neighbours, our services, and our economy. We cannot exist in any meaningful way, without reference to each other. Recognising our need for one another, our indissoluble interdependence, it is a critical step in building a peaceful country whatever the constitutional arrangements. From the gravesides of Omagh, Ballymoney and Madrid, around the table at the multi-party negotiations and indeed in the classrooms and campuses of our educational colleges, learning how to work across our differences, learning how not to silence or ignore these differences, can often be a difficult and painful lesson. What were the main ingredients that helped us do this in the multi-party negotiations that led to the Good Friday Agreement.

It involved people, processes and participation. It involved people acting as leaders, a process that was inclusive and meaningful and a form of participation between parties, people and governments that had not been there before. I have always believed that in reaching decisions, the process is as important as the outcomes. As you know, the quality of relationships between the various parties was not good – cultures clashed, some (predominantly Unionists) insisted that every single rule of procedure should be in place before we started whilst Nationalists argued that the end product was more important than spending time on a set of procedures. So with that clash of priorities, it was important to focus on how we negotiated <sup>and</sup> not just on what we were negotiating. How conflicts were aired, how problems were solved, how people could be supported (and occasionally even cared for), how our different values and standards could be defined, how controls could be enforced – and indeed how wisdom could be passed on – all of these became part of the process.

Language → education.

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move this,

N/S - curriculum.  
debate.

Quangos → contribution

↳ electoral/participatory.

Momentum - British/Irish

↳ mandates.

↳ .

Impasse

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In the end between the parties, the people and the process, we had to make choices. All kinds of people face choices. In every case the best choice is the one which takes account of change which faces up to the reality of change. In the talk's process, we too struggled to make the choices that were demanded of us. A choice between the adherence to old dogmas and certainties, old positions, old and worn language of division, a choice between that and new thinking, new vision. New thinking which comes from this generation of leaders, charged with taking this part of the world into the new Millennium.

It is the case that the political change, which NI currently faces, is historic and welcome. It is also the case that such change is threatened by overt opposition, a problem which is not in itself sufficient to block change. It is threatened, however, by a more serious problem – the problem of clashing interpretations. This is more serious because it is located among change's supporters and not just its opponents. However, the threat posed by this problem may be averted either by a form of pragmatic muddling through or preferably by an alternative and more convincing interpretation of change, that is, an interpretation that is better equipped than its clashing rivals to make sense of the new practices that change implies.

Change is historic and welcome. We need to appreciate what it is a change from. A change from partiality that characterised NI's previous experience of self government (Stormont); a change from the relative unaccountability of direct rule; and as a change from the sterile politics of constitutional standoff which stymied earlier attempts at political breakthrough and created a vacuum too easily filled by violence.

A second consideration, which makes the Agreement historic and welcome, is the range of support it has attracted. Governments, American administration, and international goodwill. Unlike previous Anglo Irish accords it is not saddled with colonial connotations, and doesn't involve any Collins/ DeValera type split within the Irish ranks. Also had the support of 8 parties. UUP and SF reached agreement.

Also had paramilitary support.

Most importantly had support of people. No vote on partition. First time to vote on a common proposal.

A Willingness to chart a new political future, a future which we are determining ourselves rather than having imposed upon us. *was also signified by this change.*

What is it a change to? Nationalists refused to accept a purely internal solution and Unionists balked at admitting anything more than purely an internal one. It seemed that fundamental constitutional divisions between Unionists and Nationalists defied reconciliation. So the totality of relationships. A reimagining of political life which is true to our collective condition in NI. Constitutional, institutional and rights based. N/s, e/w, ten new departments for government. Various powers on health and education and employment will be removed from the domain of quangos and devolved to a new Assembly operating not on the basis of majority rule but on the basis of power sharing.

We agreed to draw up a set of principles which endorsed politicians' right to challenge <sup>each</sup> others but also took on board the idea of discharging our responsibilities. My pledge of office demands that I discharge in good faith all the duties of office and to serve all the people of NI equally and to act in accordance with the general obligations on government to promote equality and prevent discrimination. So with those rights there is a new sense of responsibility. What we need is a politics that embraces this sense of responsibility. It will involve the will to come to an agreement and to cooperate, the ability to place the common and general interest over any personal and group interests and the feeling of common responsibility for our future.

A new Civic Forum will be established as part of the Agreement and it will sit alongside the Assembly in a consultative capacity. When I was involved in securing this as part of the Good Friday Agreement, it was the work and the potential leadership of the adult and <sup>those in the</sup> community education sector that offered the hope that we could grow new kinds of leaders, born out of a thriving civic society and who would one day take their much deserved place in the future decision making of NI. It exists now and as we say it is there for the taking.

We will have a whole range of new citizen rights, which will have to be enforced as part of the Agreement. The Bill of Rights for NI, alongside the ECHR, enforced by a Commission on Human Rights. Are these utilitarian necessities, given our past legacy, or are they outrageous luxuries. This was the context of a discussion we had when we were discussing the need for us, as parliamentarians, to take a pledge of office and agree to be scrutinised in a way that no other parliament is.

Series of reforms. Prisoners. So not just a constitutional convention but also a conflict resolution.

There is opposition. Anti-agreement republicans pine for a world that has never existed, except in their imaginations, demanding self-determination rather than co-determination, whilst anti-agreement unionists lament the loss of a world that is gone forever. Neither have alternatives to the agreement that are remotely likely to win enough cross community support to be workable or that will be permitted to see the light of day by the British or Irish governments. We shouldn't be over worried but we should be complacent. The potential is the for them to wreck it even if they don't have alternatives. There is a precarious balance of support for the agreement on the unionist side and there's still a chance that this balance might shift. And it is clear that Sinn Fein is being sniped at by other Republicans.

The oppositional strategies are two fold on both sides: to precipitate crises which make new political arrangements hard to operate and maintain the battle for republican and unionist hearts and minds. Either loyalist or republicans can be provoked into crisis with the corresponding results from the other side. Part of the <sup>Republican</sup> hope will be to provoke the main Loyalist Paramilitaries to retaliate and break their cease-fires and with luck and enough carnage to draw the Provisional IRA into the fray. Unionist attempts to try to provoke a crisis would *take on different forms*.

With the LVF in the picture there is the chance that a violent card matching the republican one will be played, although this organisation too has belatedly called a cease-fire. But paramilitary violence won't feature very prominently among anti-agreement Unionists. More emphasis will be placed on emotive issues capable of drawing on the support of pro-agreement Unionists. Orange marches are the best example of these. Here the aim will be to create a form of Unionist unity – based, say, on a defense of Orangemen's right to march along their traditional routes regardless of any other consideration – which polarises northern society to the point of putting unbearable strain on power-sharing government. Arguably, Drumcree 1998 came perilously close to doing just that. There will also undoubtedly be attempts to subvert the new assembly from within by any number of blocking tactics. And because of <sup>the</sup> ~~the~~ <sup>own</sup> assembly's complicated voting procedures – which require a motion to <sup>Carriage</sup> ~~acquire~~ the support of a majority of unionists and a majority of nationalists – this could be possible. All the while, there will be an ongoing appeal to pro-agreement unionists to change their minds. And this is an appeal, which remains very powerful particularly because it has the capacity to exacerbate the difficulties, which exists among the agreement's supporters. Let me now turn to the problem these cause.

## THE PROBLEM OF CLASING INTERPRETATIONS

More serious than overt opposition to the Agreement is the fact that its support appears fragile. And it appears fragile because there's anything but unanimity among certain of the key parties to the Agreement. To get the point here we need only recall that Agreement was attained without the UUP exchanging so much as a pleasantry with Sinn Fein, let alone entering into political discussions with its representatives. Obviously, in the absence of the sort of communication required to reach a common mind, both parties saw some tactical advantage in signing up to the same deal. But, just as obviously, what one party perceives as an advantage, the other typically perceives as a disadvantage, and very often a threatening one. The Belfast Agreement appears fragile, then, because its success virtually depends upon a fine and ongoing balancing act where perceived gains and losses for unionists and nationalists keep relative pace with each other, and where all parties appreciate the foolhardiness of overplaying their hands. What's immediately worrying about such a state of affairs is that it presupposes the presence of some pretty deft and well-honed political skills and, unfortunately, its precisely such skills that Northern Ireland's politicians are hardly famous for having perfected. What's more deeply worrying about it is the realisation that the Belfast Agreement hangs on understandings among its various supporters which may not differ simply in terms of nuance and pedantic details, but in terms of fundamentals. And here we are pointed to the agreement's most acute problem: that of clashing interpretations. There are two major issues I want to focus upon here: the manifest differences of interpretation, and the difficulty of reconciling these because of each interpretation's vulnerability of charges of ideological sell-out from anti-agreement factions.

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So we're living in a time of change. And it's the kind of profound, societal change, which demands choices not just of politicians but also of individual citizens and organisations.

You not only have the right to be involved in decision-making processes but with that right there is an obligation to become more involved in the political process. From now on politics is not something done to you, or thrust on you but instead should be owned by you. Yes rights and status should be conferred on you as an equal citizen of this society and you shall have them enforced but citizenship also involves participation and practice.