

Northern Ireland: the opportunity

My Lord Mayor, you have already paid tribute to the work of the City Police. I fully support that.

But I would also applaud the quiet but effective way the City responded to the Bishopsgate bomb. Business life went on. And practical measures were taken to reduce risks in the future.

The fact that terrorists bombed and murdered on the mainland make us all much more aware of the feelings of people in Northern Ireland as they contemplate the horror of the terrorist murders in their community. And of the bravery of the security forces there.

There may now be a better opportunity for peace in Northern Ireland than for many years.

There are several important elements coming together.

First, there is a burning desire on each side of the community for peace.

Not a peace at any price - but a peace that is fair and just.

This strength of feeling is far more intense than we have seen before. No one wants to continue living with death and terror and fear for another 25 years. This desire for peace gives an opportunity we must try to take.

Second, the Irish Government have shown a new understanding of the rights and concerns of Unionists. They are willing to reach out to them and, I believe, to make constitutional change a part of an overall settlement.

They accept, rightly, that it is for the people of Northern Ireland, freely and democratically, to determine their own future.

Third, most of the constitutional parties in Northern Ireland are engaged purposefully in discussions about a political settlement.

They accept that flexibility is needed to achieve a settlement. That some cherished positions will have to be modified.

All accept that no change can be made to the status of Northern Ireland without the consent of its people.

These elements present the opportunity we are determined to pursue.

Against the sombre history of Ireland, many will say that the odds are against us.

I accept that. I accept that all concerned will have to show courage, court unpopularity, break down old barriers, and take risks.

That is why we are, for our part, now actively seeking a framework to deliver peace, stability and reconciliation.

I shall not raise false hopes or set deadlines. We need both a permanent cessation of violence and intensification of the political talks.

These objectives are complementary.

We shall press forward in all three areas of the political talks.

In developing democratic and accountable structures within Northern Ireland,

In the search for a new relationship between the North and the South of Ireland.

And in building closer cooperation between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland.

And when a true basis for an agreed package is established, we aim to bring all participants back around the table to secure a lasting settlement.

We shall work to protect all the people of Northern Ireland and of Britain from terrorism; and to convince the men of violence in both communities to end violence, unconditionally and forever, and to choose instead the path of legitimate and democratic political activity.

Some would deny them that path on account of their past and present misdeeds. I understand that feeling, but I do not share it.

Let me make explicit what has always been implicit.

Those who decline to renounce violence can never have a place at the conference table in our democracy.

But if the IRA end violence for good then - after a sufficient interval to ensure the permanence of their intent - Sinn Fein can enter the political arena as a democratic party and join the dialogue on the way ahead.

There can be no secret deals. No rewards for terrorism. No abandonment of the vital principle of majority consent.

But there is the incentive that peace would bring a new and far better way of life to all the people of that troubled land.

International Security

It is of course not only in Northern Ireland that we search for peace.

The end of the Cold War may have lifted the threat of a nuclear holocaust. But it also brought great political and economic uncertainty.

In the former Yugoslavia, that uncertainty has turned into tragedy - human suffering on a scale unseen in Europe since the Second World War.

And not only in Europe. Every night the television brings us images of tragedy in Africa, in countries of the former Soviet Union, and right across the world.

We cannot ignore the suffering and conflict.

The United Nations is striving to help keep the peace and aid the afflicted. Frankly, its record has been mixed.

It has no troops and no money of its own. It relies on the contributions of member states, whose governments are bound to weigh the national interest before they commit their own people to the expenditure of blood and treasure.

But the world community is learning - slowly and painfully - how to cope with the tragedies and challenges of uncertainty.

So too are the Europeans.

Those of us who were fortunate enough to preserve our liberty and prosperity during the Cold War have a duty towards our fellow Europeans who were less fortunate.

That is why I hope that the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe can qualify as members of the Community in the not too distant future.

We won the Cold War because the Americans were willing to commit themselves to the defence of Europe.

That commitment is just as important today.

In January the leaders of the NATO Alliance will meet. NATO's transformation has gone a long way. It will go further.