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ADDRESS BY MR BERTIE AHERN TD TO THE IRISH ASSOCIATION, THE MANSION HOUSE, THURSDAY, 2 FEBRUARY 1995 AT 1.45 PM.

I am very honoured to have been invited to address this Association, so soon after being elected leader. My predecessor Albert Reynolds twelve months ago gave a very important address here in the aftermath of the Downing Street Declaration, in the context of developing the peace process.

I am aware of the history of this Association, that it was founded by some liberal Unionists in the 1930s, who wanted to keep alive the Irish dimension, which, to put it mildly, not all their colleagues wished to acknowledge. It serves to underline an important point, that the Irish identity, while greatly valued by Northern Nationalists, is not exclusive to one community or tradition. Some thought has also to be given to the wider Irish identity or dimension, which Unionists too might also be able to acknowledge and feel part of.

I and my party have always believed that in many ways it is easier to reach out successfully across the divide, from the strength of one's own tradition.

My late father was active in the struggle for independence, and would certainly have been on the more Republican wing of Fianna Fail. But attitudes evolve. For me, Fianna Fail has always been a democratic party, that is both Nationalist and Republican. In this State, we are the principal repository and expression of the historic ideals of the Irish nation. We place a high value on national independence and sovereignty and the goal of unity, recognising that each of these have a political, economic and cultural dimension. They also have to be set today in the changed context of closer European Union. As is shown in our positive commitment to Europe, we have a healthy nationalism that has no need to be chauvinistic.

Our role cannot be a passive one, clinging to the certainties and the orthodoxies of the past. We must be active in giving our ideals modern expression, in adapting them to new circumstances and to a new depth of understanding of the complexities of the problem. We must tread where no one has gone before in order to address the major unresolved problems left over from the past.

My party has played an historic role in the development of the peace process. We were able through shared ideological roots to understand Republican thinking in the North, and also to make Northern Republicans aware that there was at least one major political force in the South that had an understanding, however imperfect, of the way that they perceived their experience.

Above all, we were prepared to become actively engaged in the search for peace, without being inhibited by the heavy political risks, accompanying any form of contact, while violence was going on. After the ceasefire, we took immediate steps to bring Sinn Fein fully into the democratic life of this country, and we quickly established the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation in which they play a full and

equal part. Our role in Opposition will in many ways be a continuation of our role in Government, trying to push the peace process forward by tackling the many issues, some difficult, some not, that need to be addressed, if vital momentum is to be maintained. We must never forget particularly in the furore of the last 24 hours, the basic equation, peace equals lives saved.

The peace was built on skilful contact work right across the Northern communities. A channel was developed into virtually every strand of political opinion. In addition to the excellent relations my party always had with the SDLP, we have built up a good relationship with both Sinn Fein and the Alliance Party. Earlier this week, I was the first Fianna Fail leader to set foot in West Belfast, since Eamon de Valera was arrested there in 1929. I was also the first Fianna Fail leader to step inside the headquarters in Glengall Street of the Ulster Unionist Party, and to be received by the Lord Mayor of Belfast. We were glad to have one of the leading members of the PUP David Ervine address a Fianna Fail Comhairle meeting in Dun Laoghaire last October. We must break down the barriers, and engage in political dialogue with all strands of opinion, even where immediate results cannot be expected.

From a policy point of view, we will continue the approach that we adopted in Government. We will stand over the positions and the compromises we were prepared to make in Government, even if it is more difficult to do that in Opposition. The Joint Declaration, above all, was our initiative, and we are pleased that it has now become the cornerstone of democratic politics in the North, and is owned by virtually all parties both North and South and by both Governments.

One of the bible readings appointed for last Sunday from Paul's Epistle to the Corinthians, Chapter 3, verses 10-16, is peculiarly apposite to the situation that we

find ourselves in now. The 'I' of course does not refer specifically to me, but to the stage we had reached :

'By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful, how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid..... the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the fire'.

We all have a common interest in the success of the peace process, and we will support the Government's efforts to consolidate it and move it forward for the duration of their term of office.

The maintenance of peace, the vindication of the democratic method of resolving deep political differences, is the overriding priority of all of us, ahead of any other political aim. Peace is the only absolute imperative, to which we must all subscribe.

The last 25 years showed conclusively that political violence, in relation to solving the problems of the North, was indeed the *cul de sac* that the independence generation in the 1920s rightly suspected it to be.

The Joint Declaration enshrines not just the principle of consent, but also the principle of self-determination, and in that respect goes beyond the Anglo-Irish Agreement. The two principles are in many ways different sides of the same coin.

The central aim of new negotiations is to reach a new agreement on how the people of Ireland will share the island. The focus is not an internal settlement, which on its

own will not work, or devolved Government on a responsibility-sharing basis, though that should be part of the solution. The aim is to achieve an agreed Ireland, which will allow everyone in this island to live in peace and reconciliation, with a sense that justice has been vindicated. Equality of treatment must replace second-class citizenship. North-South institutions are firmly written into the Downing Street Declaration, and are part of the foundation of peace, as they were meant to be back in 1920.

North-South institutions with executive powers are a fundamentally different concept from joint authority. Joint authority, which Fianna Fail have never advocated or regarded as a realistic possibility, is essentially joint rule over Northern Ireland by the Irish and British Governments. North-South institutions relate not just to the North, but to North and South equally. They mean North and South working together freely in their common interest, on the basis of a democratic mandate. Even if Government institutions in the North were to break down, there is no question of resorting to joint authority, but equally it does not necessarily mean that all functioning North-South cooperation would break down. The Lough Foyle Fisheries Commission continued in existence, after Stormont was abolished, and no one has seriously suggested that that is a manifestation of joint authority.

We are all aware of developments in the South over the last 25 years. In terms of the two traditions, we have been moving away from majority rule tempered by the fair individual treatment of the minority, which characterised Ireland from the 1920s to the 1960s, towards a pluralist society, which recognises many different traditions and minorities.

The North in a different way is also becoming a more pluralist society, although the

degree of segregation between the two communities has been reinforced in many places by the Troubles. There too, while a majority has its constitutional rights recognised, if it wants any kind of agreement, it can no longer determine alone the entire character of the laws, institutions and political life within Northern Ireland, or unilaterally lay down that there will be no formal relations or structures shared with the rest of the island, even where they do not impinge on its constitutional status, regardless of the desires of the other community. None of us are asking for Unionists to give an inch on their rights, on their birthright, on their traditions, on their right to safeguard their future in any new dispensation. What we are asking is that they accord the same rights to Nationalists, recognising that they too value their birthright, their traditions, and the promise of a future that is better than the past.

Northern Ireland will only work as a political entity, if there is a spirit of give and take, if there is genuine partnership. It cannot operate as a one-party or one-tradition hegemony. Consent is a two-way process. The Nationalist community were incorporated into Northern Ireland against their will and have been subjected in the past to both discrimination and coercion, that still lingers on, as one can see graphically in West Belfast. Unionists now have to ask themselves, do they want to win the consent of Nationalists for the political and constitutional arrangements that they wish to preserve in Northern Ireland, or do they believe deep down that even reasonable Nationalist wishes are profoundly subversive, and can or should simply be ignored, as they were for 50 years under Stormont?

Irish Nationalism has changed. Irredentism is dead. I know of almost no one, who believes it is feasible or desirable to attempt to incorporate Northern Ireland into the Republic or into a united Ireland against the will of a majority there, either by force or coercion. Ireland is, in the view of the vast majority of us, one nation, which is

divided, because its two traditions have by and large chosen up till now to live under two different jurisdictions. In my view, we have to leave behind us the territorial claims, if that is the correct description, of the Irish and British States, and vest the future of Ireland exclusively in the hands of its people, North and South, in keeping with the principles set out in the Joint Declaration. In keeping with our principles, it is the people of Ireland who are sovereign, not the State, be it British or Irish.

But equally the legitimacy of any new dispensation, of new agreed political arrangements for Northern Ireland and Ireland as a whole must be capable of winning the consent of the Nationalist community. That is the challenge facing us all in the talks that will follow publication of the Framework Document. Premature and selective leaks are always damaging. The Downing Street Declaration might never have come into being, if the earlier drafts of it had been published. Our position of principle is clear. The Framework Document is intended to provide a basis for discussion and negotiation. We must wait for its completion, before engaging in full scale debate on the issues involved. Neither Government should be deflected in any way from completing the document in the manner in which they had intended. I would like to praise the statesmanlike approach of Prime Minister John Major in his impassioned broadcast last night, where he asked for time and for trust, and said that peace should not be thrown away by fears which are unreal and accusations that are untrue.

No one should condemn the document in advance without having seen it in full. No one, who cherishes peace, should refuse to face up to the real issues. As Paul Bew writes in today's Times, there is no future for simplistic vetoes. A new accommodation has to be achieved, with a readiness to engage in all reasonable forms of cooperation.

If negotiations are to be successful, then all parties must be included. It is not only a question of full Sinn Fein participation. Ways must be found of allowing the small Loyalist parties to take part at the Conference table.

In our view, it would be premature to attempt to insist at this stage on the decommissioning of weapons being dealt with first, even though it is a very important issue. Confidence in peace and mutual trust requires to be further built up through negotiation, before a permanent disposal of weapons becomes a real possibility, either for Loyalists or Republicans.

Apart from political negotiations, there is progress to be made on many other fronts.

I welcome the fact that the Government here have carried forward our programme of releasing prisoners. I accept the point put to us by Unionists in Belfast earlier this week that all releases should take place within the framework of law, rather than outside it. Respected authorities on the situation, who are implacable enemies of paramilitary organisations, such as Father Denis Faul, have long seen prisoners as a key factor in the situation. We know that both Republican and Loyalist prisoners mostly exercised a positive and constructive influence on the ceasefire decisions. It would be ironic, if the British Government were to adopt a harder line on prisoners, following the ceasefire, than they did before it.

I do not think any of us, Governments, States, Political Parties, or opinion-formers are entitled to comfortable feelings of moral superiority. The responsibility for the tragedy in Northern Ireland and the fact that it lasted 25 years and cost over 3,000 lives is widely shared. Church leaders in England and Ireland have frankly acknowledged this. If we want peace, there has to be an acknowledgement of

wrong, forgiveness, and the will to reconciliation on all sides. There must be an active determination to clear up the legacy of the past informed by a moral purpose. Once we are certain that no more terrible deeds will be committed and that there is no risk of the conflict resuming, then I would be for the phased release, in accordance with law, of the vast majority of prisoners on all sides who were caught up in the conflict. That, I believe, is the morally and politically correct thing to do.

At the Forum recently, we heard the genuine feelings and concerns of the families of the victims of violence. They should not be forgotten, and policies and support frameworks need to be developed, to make it clear that the memory of their loved ones is cherished by society.

There are many other issues, which should now be pursued. All emergency legislation should be reviewed with regard to its continued relevance. The last Government had intended before Christmas to lift the State of Emergency, and ratify the European Convention on the Transfer of Prisoners.

Economic regeneration and jobs were an issue that we encountered all over West Belfast. Where there is an unemployment black spot down here, the IDA are encouraged and treated as a priority. The North's Industrial Promotion Bodies should likewise be encouraged to focus on areas of high unemployment in the North. We also see great potential in North-South economic co-operation, both all along the border, and down the East Coast corridor. We are developing some new policy proposals in this area.

There are two other issues, which I wish to refer to, arising from my visit to Belfast.

State funding has so far been refused to Mean Scoil Feirste, the only Irish speaking secondary school in the North, which I visited on Monday. Yet, State funding is given both North and South to smaller Church of Ireland schools in rural areas. This issue of the Mean Scoil is a basic test of pluralism in the North. Mr. Chris McGimpsey of the UUP has supported funding for the Mean Scoil. I would urge Sir Patrick Mayhew to find his way through the bureaucratic obstacles.

I also visited the Conway Mill, a large community centre with small enterprises, which for political reasons has been persistently refused State funding. Political vetting must be replaced by proper systems of financial accountability for public funds. Official discrimination against communities because they are Loyalist or Republican minded must stop forthwith, if we want the people of those communities to believe that peace will make a real difference.

There is a price to be paid by everyone for peace. For us, that price is that we, the people of this State, must remain involved and engaged in helping to address the concerns and the problems of the people of the North, and that we do not again abandon them, as many Nationalists believed that we did over a long period. But we have the chance, not simply to be champions of the rights of Nationalists, but to develop through greater exchanges and the building up of trust a sense of partnership with Unionists and with the people of Northern Ireland as a whole. Unity and division are opposite ends of a spectrum, with a continuum in between. We do not have to be at one end or the other in order to create a better life for us all. It is the ground in between that will be most profitable to cultivate in the time ahead.