

LORD MAYOR'S BANQUET SPEECH

Draft Passage on Northern Ireland (0900 Friday 12 November)

I firmly believe that we now have the best opportunity for peace in Northern Ireland for 25 years. Why do I say that? What makes the difference now?

There are several elements coming together for the first time.

First, there is a burning desire in both communities for peace; not a peace at any price but a peace that is fair and just. This strength of feeling is of an intensity and insistence that has not been witnessed before. No one wants to continue living with death and terror and fear for another 25 years. This desire for peace must receive a positive response.

Second, the Irish Government have shown that they are sensitive to the concerns of the Unionists and are willing to reach out to them. They accept the right of the people of Northern Ireland to determine, democratically, their own future. They are willing to make constitutional change as part of an overall settlement.

The Irish Prime Minister has said that his Government is ready to listen to the Unionists at any time and any place.

Third - the experience of the past two years has demonstrated that the constitutional parties in Northern Ireland are willing to engage purposefully in discussions about a settlement in Northern Ireland.

They have all accepted that flexibility is needed to achieve a settlement.

From this base, we are determined to move forward. Against the sombre history of the past quarter century, 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.

I shall not raise false hopes or set deadlines. But we intend to move steadily towards a full resumption of the political talks. When the time is right, we shall bring the parties back around the table. If it helps the process, the British Government will be prepared to put forward ideas of its own.

We shall press forward in all three areas. 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.

We shall work unremittingly to protect the people of Northern Ireland and of Britain from terrorism; and to convince the men of violence in both communities to renounce 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.

There must be an incentive to cease violence. Not a secret deal. Not a reward for terrorism. Not abandonment of the vital principle of majority consent. But the incentive that peace would bring a new and far, far better way of life to all the people of that troubled land.