

**Address by Mr. Ray Burke T.D., Minister for Foreign
Affairs
to the British-Irish Association Conference
Newnham College, Cambridge, 12 September 1997**

I am fortunate indeed to be able to deliver my first address to the British-Irish Association against a background of unprecedented opportunity for the peace process. Stalwarts of the BIA will recall listening over the years to representatives of the Irish and British Governments expressing the view that a just and lasting peace was possible if only there could be an end to violence and all representatives of the people of Northern Ireland would come to the negotiating table.

Despite the efforts of many, including those of the BIA, which has striven over the years to shine the light of reason through the fog of ignorance and mistrust, these two essential preconditions were never achieved at the same time.

There was a surge of optimism when, back in 1994, the Association found itself meeting barely ten days after the IRA

ceasefire. Not unreasonably, many felt that we were experiencing a new dawn. Sadly, it turned out to be a false dawn. By September 1995, when the conference last met in Cambridge, concern was already being voiced about the lack of progress on the political front.

By the time of last year's Conference, we had political talks but no IRA ceasefire. We also had the fall-out from Drumcree 2, including its bitter aftermath of rising sectarian tensions.

Now, at last, due to the courage and imagination of a great many people, we have both IRA and loyalist ceasefires and a talks process which is open to both Governments and all the main political parties operating in Northern Ireland. Within a matter of days, substantive political negotiations will be underway. If we can adhere to the bold target set out by Tony Blair, next year's BIA Conference should be discussing the shape of the new comprehensive agreement and considering what role it should adopt for itself in the context of an utterly changed environment.

Some might feel that I am allowing myself to get carried away. Believe me, I am not. Nobody is more aware than I am of the challenges that await those who will sit at the negotiating table. It is only now that we will face the truly hard questions. How do we convert the desire to talk into a comprehensive political settlement? How can we reconcile the difference between two such fundamentally different aspirations? The answers to those questions will not be easily uncovered. But we must go into the negotiations believing that we will find them. If we start off believing that we will fail, this unprecedented opportunity to resolve our differences will surely slip away.

Success will require each and every participant in the negotiations to compromise on deeply held positions. How can this be brought about? The theme of today's conference points to a tried and tested formula - "carrots and sticks". Peaceful persuasion is indeed the means to which all the participants in the negotiations are committed, but any pressures or inducements will have to be carefully calibrated and judiciously applied.

Let us not delude ourselves. Unionists are no more likely to turn green at the sight of the 'Celtic Tiger' than were nationalists to give loyalty to the Half-Crown. Similarly, nationalists have been no more ready to be pressured out of their identity since partition than were unionists before it.

That will not prevent legitimate and well-intentioned efforts by representatives of each community to persuade others to abandon their aspirations for a better future elsewhere.

Indeed, such arguments will be an important element of any meaningful negotiating process. Nationalists and unionists must learn to listen to each other and to understand the hopes, fears and grievances which divide them. Moreover, it is an important principle of these negotiations that no outcome is preordained or excluded in advance. What I offer here today is an opinion, not a prescription.

I find it hard to imagine that, for the foreseeable future, either unionists or nationalists are going to become what the other wants them to be. The arguments that they should will be sharp and delivered with conviction, but it is frankly difficult

to see them penetrating the well tested armour of accumulated historic prejudice.

So what will be the key to reconciliation. For my part, I would follow, at least to some degree, the advice of Benjamin Franklin when he said:

“would you persuade, speak of interest, not of reason”

If our differences are to be resolved, it will be, at least to some significant degree, on the basis of self-interest. That is why I am confident that the political negotiations will succeed; because it will be in the interest of those at the table that they do so. However divergent the goals may be - whether it is a united Ireland or a stable Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom - both Governments and the parties know that they can be achieved only through a negotiated agreement. Only those who care nothing for the future would see comfort in the precarious status quo, or see potential in the use of violence as a means to political ends.

But how do we find a way around the conflict of aspirations?

I would suggest that if we cannot, at this stage, realistically aspire to a permanent resolution of the constitutional issue which satisfies the aspirations of all, or nearly all, the people of Northern Ireland, we should attempt to deal with the problem by agreeing to constitutional change in both ~~jurisdictions~~ jurisdictions based on the principle of consent in all its aspects.

If the parties are confident that both communities will be given reassurance on the constitutional issue, what then can be the objection to the parties joining the Governments in achieving a new beginning for relationships within Northern Ireland, within the island of Ireland and between Britain and Ireland, or to agreeing new institutions and structures to take account of the totality of these relationships. Surely, this would be in the best interest of all.

Let us take an honest look at the situation of each community. First, if I may, the nationalist community. As I made clear in the Belfast Telegraph, earlier in the week, I am a republican.

Some have expressed surprise that I should say this. I am surprised at their surprise. Unionists, interestingly enough, are not taken aback; they expect a Government Minister representing the Republic to be a republican. I do not disappoint them in that regard. Nevertheless, it is important that I also make clear that the Republic that I represent is committed to exclusively peaceful means of resolving political issues and is resolutely opposed to the use of force for political ends.

My aspiration is to see a united Ireland bringing together all the people of my country - whatever their faith or affiliation. I believe that the partition of Ireland was misguided. But it happened and my response must reflect that reality. Northern Ireland was established three-quarters of a century ago, before most of the present members of the United Nations came into existence. It is a reality. It cannot simply be wished away, nor can it be blown away.

Nationalists want change in the political arrangements on the island of Ireland - both within Northern Ireland and between

North and South. They want to see arrangements within Northern Ireland which will allow them to enjoy the same sense of ownership and belonging as unionists. They want to live in a society in which all the people can feel themselves chosen, not just those who belong to the majority community; a society in which the state can be relied upon to ensure parity of esteem and equality of treatment; a society where their Irish language and culture is not treated by the State as alien in its own land.

Nationalists throughout Ireland want to see a strong North-South Body invested with the necessary powers to maximise the potential for mutual cooperation between the two parts of the island. We are a small island with relatively few natural resources other than the genius of our people. It makes no sense not to do all we can to harness our collective energies and resources in the service of our common good. There is also the point that a strong North-South Body will allow Northern nationalists the chance to share with unionists the sense that their aspirations and identity are reflected in the governance and administration of their home place.

I believe that all this can be achieved in the forthcoming negotiations, but only with the consent of the people of Ireland expressed through referendums - North and South.

The principle of consent, as set out in the Downing Street Declaration, is a principle which is supported by parties representing the overwhelming majority of the people on the island of Ireland. I have no problem in stating without ambiguity that any change in the status of Northern Ireland would only come about with the consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland. Moreover, the Irish Government believes that it would be wrong to attempt to impose a united Ireland in the absence of the freely given consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland.

This means that those who aspire to a united Ireland must secure the support of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland for such a proposal. This will not come about as a result of a religious head-count. Only those who wish to stir up fear and resentment would pretend that the situation was that simple. If unity is ever to happen, it will do so only when

a majority of the people in Northern Ireland can be convinced that it is in their interest. This is not likely to occur without an accumulation of trust having been built up between the communities during a period of sustained and fruitful cooperation. Those of us who want to unite the Irish people must recognise that it will only ever be achieved by patient and peaceful persuasion based on tolerance and reconciliation.

It is clear, therefore, that it is in the interests of nationalists to seek a comprehensive agreement in the present negotiations covering relationships in Northern Ireland, between North and South, and between Ireland and Britain.

But what about the unionists? According to the zero-sum calculations which traditionally underlay Northern Ireland politics, if a political agreement is good for nationalists, it must be bad for unionists. This is not so. But is there a unionist leader who is brave enough to admit this publicly?

Those of you who were at the Conference here in Cambridge two years ago will remember that the weekend's discussions

were dominated by events in the Ulster Hall in Belfast where the Ulster Unionist Council was meeting to elect a new leader of the UUP. The decision caused some surprise at the time - David Trimble was considered to be the dark horse of the contest. In retrospect, perhaps, we should not have been surprised that unionists should elect a young, articulate and forceful proponent of unionism to lead their party into negotiations.

There was talk at the time of a "New Unionism"; of a self-confident leadership willing to go out and promote the unionist cause to the world and to negotiate with nationalism. To be honest, some commentators thought early on that those hopes were to be disappointed. But more recent events have given rise to renewed optimism. David Trimble's decision to consult with the wider unionist community and with representatives of the Catholic Church and the nationalist community was a bold step, which I applaud. Now, just as was the case two years ago, this conference awaits word from Belfast on the direction in which the UUP will lead unionism.

I cannot see that unionist self-interest points in any other direction than entry into inclusive all-party negotiations.

Unionists want to see a Northern Ireland prospering within the United Kingdom. A Northern Ireland at peace with itself and cooperating with the rest of the island we share together. They want a society in which their children will want to live and raise their own children, rather than one in which the brightest and best are anxious to leave. That sort of Northern Ireland can only come about with the consent of the nationalist community who make up perhaps 43% of the population and are themselves in a majority across large parts of Northern Ireland.

To obtain that consent, unionists have to be prepared to talk to both nationalists and the Irish Government. This is not a big risk to take. In fact, it is hardly a risk at all, since not alone is their position underpinned by the principle of consent, but the Governments have made clear that any agreement will have to be approved by referendum in Northern Ireland.

Nevertheless, it is undeniably a traumatic decision for Unionism. To those on the outside, Unionism appears to be instinctively defensive; driven by the determination that "what we have we hold". Up until now, it has seemed to be comfortable to remain in the trenches, perhaps reflecting the sub-conscious sense that the Union with Britain was bonded by the appalling sacrifice of the Somme offensive. But times are changing. The Union itself is in a process of evolution. Tactics must move on. If the unionist parties do not come out of the trenches and engage in negotiations they run the risk of being by-passed - not by the Governments, but by the people.

Would it not be ironic if those who criticised the Governments for not adequately consulting them on the Anglo-Irish Agreement, the Downing Street Declaration, and the Framework Document were to spurn the opportunity of full involvement in the negotiations for which these documents were ultimately preparing the way? Negotiations, moreover, which have a specific provision whereby agreement in the negotiations can take place only with the

support of parties representing both the unionist and nationalist communities.

Would it not be absurd if those who claim that the problems which confront us can only be resolved in negotiations between the people of Northern Ireland, were themselves to refuse to sit down with the representatives elected by the people of Northern Ireland for the specific purpose of such negotiations?

Would it not represent a failure of nerve if those who complain about the attention given to the concerns of Sinn Féin were to fail to challenge Sinn Féin's position in direct debate?

I raise these questions. It is for others to answer them.

What I will say is that the Irish Government wants to see all unionist parties continue to be represented at the negotiations, including the PUP and the UDP who have contributed so much to maintaining the loyalist ceasefire and who have the

potential to contribute even more to the forthcoming political talks.

I know that unionists have genuine concerns in relation to the decommissioning of paramilitary arms. This is also a matter of considerable concern to the Irish Government. We are firmly committed to the disarmament of all paramilitary organisations. The Gardaí have enjoyed some notable recent successes in seizing illegally-held arms and they will continue their efforts in this regard.

However, together with the British Government, we are also seeking to persuade the paramilitary organisations to engage in the voluntary decommissioning of their arms. We are convinced that the only realistic means of achieving this is in the context of comprehensive and political negotiations leading to a lasting peaceful settlement.

Last month, I signed an international agreement with the Northern Ireland Secretary, Mo Mowlam, providing for the establishment of an Independent Commission to facilitate the

decommissioning of paramilitary arms. We are currently engaged in putting in place the remaining arrangements - including consultation of the parties on the appointment of the members - so as to ensure that the Commission can start work alongside the political negotiations.

In addition, Sinn Féin and the loyalist parties have committed themselves to the Mitchell Principles. These are a strong test of the commitment of these parties to democracy and non-violence. The two Governments will expect all parties in the negotiations to honour their commitment to each and every one of these principles. Before anyone raises the question of remarks which appeared in *An Phoblacht* earlier in the week, let me confirm the Taoiseach's statement that the Irish Government expects the entire Republican Movement to honour the Mitchell Principles.

Unionists should not allow their concerns on decommissioning to cast them as the opponents of dialogue. They have too much to gain from entering negotiations and too much to lose by staying away. The time for talking is

now. Those who argue “never in my lifetime” will have to answer to the judgement of history.

Sadly, the present troubles have already lasted long enough for us to draw historical conclusions. Comprehensive negotiations pointed the way to a solution in the past as they do now. Political leaders have the responsibility to lead their people in that direction. But we should not expect politicians to shoulder sole responsibility for securing a peaceful future. Many have argued, most cogently in my view, that the most effective way to remove the gun from Irish politics is to decommission the mind-set which regards violence as an acceptable means of achieving political ends. But we also need to eliminate the mind-set which tolerates sectarian hatred.

Prejudice is part of human nature. Most communities have notions about their neighbours. Such benign wisdoms can be an endearing element of local culture, as illustrated by a poet of these parts, Rupert Brooke, in *The Old Vicarage*,

Grantchester when he suggested that “Cambridge people rarely smile, being urban, squat and packed with guile”. In their malign form, as found in Northern Ireland, that can be a matter of life and death. The examples are many and varied.

In the space of a few weeks in July, two young people were brutally murdered, simply because they were Catholics who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Only this week, there was an attempt to burn out a family who had lived in their home for thirty-five years on the grounds of their religion. Over the years of the Troubles a number of Protestant families farming near the Fermanagh border have felt compelled to leave the land the families had held for generations. I welcome efforts that are now underway to encourage some of these families to return.

Politicians can help to lead people away from the attitudes which fuel this type of sectarian violence, but the wider community also has a responsibility to bear. Individuals need to examine their own mind-sets and ask themselves whether they are going to be part of the solution or part of the

problem.

The same is true in respect of support for the negotiations. Politicians can only deliver lasting peace if they have the support of the community. Those who are prepared to take risks to bring about lasting peace deserve the support of those on whose behalf they are taking those risks. Those who sit on the fence deserve to be left there.

This is a time for bold new thinking on what used to be known as the Irish Question. Attitudes can be changed. Prejudice can be eliminated. Just look at the situation of Newnham College. It is almost impossible to believe that it was not until 1948 that women were formally awarded degrees at Cambridge and admitted to full membership of the University. Is it too much to hope that years hence we might look back with similar disbelief at the situation in Northern Ireland today?

The people of Northern Ireland - across both communities - have shown great courage and fortitude in facing up to the

troubles of the past. What is required now is courage of a different kind. The courage to reach out, to engage in dialogue, to show imagination, and to enter into compromise. With this kind of courage I believe that we can construct a fair, honourable and comprehensive agreement, which will see the gun and the bomb forever removed from the political life of these islands, and which all parties can, with dignity and pride, ask their people to accept and endorse.