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Address by the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr Dick Spring, T.D.

To the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body

Adare, Co. Limerick, 29 April 1996

I am very pleased to meet again with colleagues and friends from the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body, and in particular to do so here in Co. Limerick. Had I remained a member of the Body possibly I could have persuaded you to journey those extra few miles to Kerry - but perhaps another time, and no doubt my party colleague Jim Kemmy, the present proud Mayor of his native city, and fellow Limerick man Des O'Malley, will prove excellent hosts and guides over the next few days.

Adare Manor was formerly, of course, the home of the Dunraven family, who happily continue to live in this neighbourhood. The most celebrated Earl of Dunraven was the leader, in the early years of this century, of those Southern Unionists who sought constructive engagement with the rising tide of Irish nationalism. His political endeavours to build bridges between the two traditions - notably in the Irish Convention of 1917/18 - ultimately failed, but his legacy, as one of the principal architects of land reform, is apparent throughout Ireland. I am sure he would be the first to understand the importance of the co-operation and friendship between the two islands represented by the continuing work of this Body, and fully approve our present endeavours under his ancestral roof.

Another prominent Anglo-Irish figure, the novelist Elizabeth Bowen, once ruefully described relations between Britain and Ireland as "a mixture of showing off and suspicion - almost as bad as sex." I hesitate to develop this particular analogy any further in relation to the work of this distinguished Body. However, it is undoubtedly true that the British-Irish relationship is close and complex, often intense and passionate, and carries at once the potential for great benefit and great hurt.

As our recently published White Paper on Foreign Policy puts it - a little more prosaically than Elizabeth Bowen, I admit - "Relations between Ireland and Great Britain are in many respects extremely close and are of the utmost importance to both countries." I feel, however, that over the past twenty-five years immense



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strides have been made towards the normalisation, and indeed equalisation, of our relationship. Ireland, as a state, an economy, and a society, has changed rapidly, and has developed both in self-awareness and in self-confidence, and, I believe, in maturity.

A major factor in this has been our membership of the European Union, in which we have evolved new perspectives upon ourselves and upon the world. Wider horizons have helped to set our relationship with Britain in a context which, while as intimate as ever it was, is perhaps less stifling and more balanced. In a little over a month we assume the Presidency of the Council for the fifth time. We are strongly committed to its further development, and hope the UK will play its own full and distinctive role in that process. The Union would certainly be the poorer should the British role ever become faltering and inward-looking, rather than the creative and confident part that its history and its political weight would lead us, and indeed our other European partners, to hope for.

This Body has made, and continues to make, a unique and invaluable contribution to greater understanding and improved relations between our two countries. It has helped create a Parliamentary and general political environment characterised by a new depth of mutual understanding and insight in both countries, without which the major Northern Ireland initiatives of recent years would have been more difficult to contemplate or to advance.

The influence and impact of the Body has also reached into Government. I know that my own understanding of the British perspective on Irish issues and of the complex relationships between our two peoples has benefitted greatly from my time in the Body. It is relevant to note in this context that five members of the present Irish Government, including the Taoiseach, are former members of the Body and current and past members are well represented on the front benches of the opposition parties.

The wide ranging and impressive reports prepared by the Body over the years are evidence of the energy and activity of the four working Committees. They make a solid contribution to greater understanding of issues of mutual concern and offer a valuable resource for Government action and policies in these areas. I can assure you that we in Government welcome your contributions. We will continue to give serious consideration to recommendations made, and where possible we will respond positively.

I note that this Plenary will have before it two further valuable and substantial reports which I believe both Governments will find helpful and constructive. I am encouraged and reassured by the very positive assessment of the work of the



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International Fund for Ireland in the report from the Economic and Social Committee. Equally the report of the Cultural Committee highlights the extensive existing North-South cooperation in the arts, culture and sport and contains helpful suggestions and persuasive advocacy for its further development.

I congratulate you in particular on your continuing positive involvement in debate on the Northern Ireland issue. This is due in no small way to the very sincere commitment and enthusiasm of the leadership of the Body, the present and past Co-Chairmen and members of the Steering Committee.

Northern Ireland remains the greatest challenge facing both our Governments together and the fashioning of a durable settlement would exorcise the last ghosts haunting our relationship.

The interest and potential contribution of the Body is more important than ever in this uncertain but pivotal time.

We have now reached an important juncture in the search for a settlement. It has been agreed that, following the elective process which is now getting underway, negotiations will begin on 10th June.

Time alone will tell whether those negotiations will prove the decisive turning point in our relationships. I do not doubt that these negotiations have indeed the potential to achieve a new beginning in all our relationships. Whether or not that potential is realised depends on the political will of the protagonists, both individually and collectively.

I think it fair to say that most of the parties, from their different viewpoints, view the prospective negotiations in a state of suspense, balancing hope and expectation with fear and despondency. It is the duty of our two Governments, precisely because of the responsibilities and leadership requirements that flow from our roles as the Governments, to consolidate the grounds for hope and optimism and to tip the balance decisively in that direction.

If there is one over-riding lesson which can be distilled from decades of experience of this tragic and costly conflict, it is this: partnership between the British and Irish Governments is always a necessary condition for progress. The people living in Northern Ireland did not themselves create the Northern Ireland conflict. They were placed in the situation they are in by the history of the wider British-Irish relationship. It is in that wider relationship that a settlement must be sought and grounded. Our rejection of an internal settlement is not just a matter of doctrine. It is also the realistic and pragmatic response to a situation where the conflicting



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aspirations of both nationalists and unionists clearly transcend the internal Northern Ireland relationship. Their politics on both sides relate to the wider Irish and British dimensions, and so must any proposed accommodation.

I believe historians looking back on recent decades will see as the dominant trend a steady and productive pattern of ever-increasing cooperation between the two Governments. This cooperation is grounded on the central tenet of the equal legitimacy of the nationalist and unionist traditions in Ireland, and a consequent policy of seeking a peaceful accommodation between them based on the universal application of consent and mutual respect. It is codified in a series of documents - notably the Anglo-Irish Agreement, the Joint Declaration and the New Framework for Agreement - which set out in increasing detail and sophistication both our shared analysis of the problem and the possible shape of a fair and honourable solution to the dilemmas history has left us. The taste - I hope it will prove to have been the foretaste - of peace which we had in the eighteen months following the ceasefires owed much to the climate created by this steady advance in intergovernmental cooperation, based on joint purpose. Our hopes of restoring the peace will be in direct proportion to the extent we can refurbish and consolidate it.

The peace process underway in Ireland for the past several years is unprecedented both in its ambitions and its approach. It aims for an inclusive agreement which can embrace the entire spectrum of opinion, rather than a partial process, with the inevitable agenda of exclusion, and possibly repression, which that entails. It takes the realistic approach that all the parties to the problem are a product of its history and should be enabled to be part of the solution - that indeed the Governments have a positive duty to build the most solid possible bridges for them in that respect - subject only to ensuring that the negotiations are explicitly on the basis of a common commitment to democratic values and outcomes.

Given its unprecedented nature, it was perhaps inevitable that errors, both of omission and commission, should have been made on all sides since the ceasefires of 1994. There were those who perhaps believed that a genuinely inclusive process was never attainable, and that no very great investment was necessary in a strategy which would inevitably revert to the older approach of uniting the presumed moderates to isolate the presumed extremes. That strategy is in many ways more comfortable, but it has also consistently failed to date. There were others who felt it intolerable that the paramilitaries had not been thoroughly crushed by security means - glossing over whether that was ever possible - and that to seek peace on any other basis was doubtful and delusory. The paramilitaries, for their part, fostered doubts on their democratic commitment by various continued activities, for example the barbarity of the so-called "punishment" attacks. The political momentum and optimistic engagement which should have flowed from the ceasefires were not allowed to develop.



I must however reject utterly, as the Taoiseach did immediately after the Canary Wharf bomb, any attempt to suggest that political mistakes can be invoked to in some way diminish the enormity of recourse to terror and the taking of human life.

The Canary Wharf bomb destroyed more than the lives of its victims. It shattered also the growing hope that we had at last seen the end of killing as a political instrument. Those who perpetrated this and the subsequent atrocities know that the Irish Government, all parties represented in the Oireachtas, and the overwhelming majority of people of all traditions on this island totally reject the use of violence for political purposes. That is not only because we believe it immoral and wrong, although that is assuredly the case. It is also illogical and counterproductive, because one can never find agreement and trust through violence and coercion, or build justice on injustice.

What of the future? Do we resign ourselves stoically to the notion that the Northern Ireland problem is insoluble, and that violence will always be with us?

I did not believe at the outset of this process that the problem was insoluble or that violence was inevitable. I do not believe it now.

On the contrary, I believe that all the key considerations which influenced the initial cessation of violence are still valid. I believe that peace can still prevail.

It is obvious that there can be no victory or defeat in this conflict. A military quest for victory, irrespective of whether it comes from the security forces or the paramilitaries, can take us through many cycles of violence, and multiply the number of victims indefinitely. At the end, however, the underlying situation will remain as it is now: two traditions and two communities, each with the critical mass to block the other, destined either to cooperate on a basis of mutual respect and equal treatment, or, failing that, to poison each others' lives indefinitely. I believe that paramilitary leaders on both sides are clear-sighted on this - in some cases more perhaps than some conventional politicians.

Secondly, the two Governments are committed to inclusive negotiations, subject only to one single, but crucial, precondition, namely the unequivocal restoration of the IRA ceasefire. We are agreed that these will begin on June 10th. We are determined they will be meaningful for all participants.

In those negotiations the Irish Government will work for a just and lasting settlement, on the lines we have set out consistently in recent years, and in particular in the Framework Document.



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I know there has been criticism, which might be shared even by some members of this Body, at the notion of any special relationship between the Irish Government and the nationalist community in Northern Ireland. This has been stigmatised as "pan-nationalist", as though any agreement among nationalists in Ireland, whatever its content and practical effect, must by definition be reprehensible.

I believe it is inevitable, for reasons of history, identity and aspiration, that nationalists in Northern Ireland will attach great importance to the role of the Irish Government. As a result of the circumstances of Northern Ireland's creation and its subsequent development, there exists a pervasive structural inequality - psychological and symbolic as well as political and socio-economic - between the two communities there. That inequality has itself been one of the causes of instability. It is accepted in almost all quarters that a different political dispensation will be needed, even if the vision of what it should be differs predictably.

The role of the Irish Government has been, and always will be, as the resolute opponent of violence and a champion of peaceful means and consent. If the role of the Irish Government reassures nationalists in Northern Ireland that the political processes governing them will be meaningful, and they will never again be marginalised, as they were in the past, I believe that both the British Government and the unionist community should welcome that as a resource to increase the prospect of political consensus and democratic commitment, whose absence in Northern Ireland has been so costly to date. If we can contribute in any significant degree to setting this island on the path to agreement and peace through our involvement with the nationalist community, and in the negotiations generally, it would be strange, and indeed irresponsible, to stand aloof. It is the duty of the Irish Government to be both an advocate of change and a facilitator of its acceptance and achievement.

Our concern with the rights of nationalists in Northern Ireland does not mean that we are, or need to be, ignorant or indifferent as regards Unionist concerns. Simple realism indicates that no lasting settlement is going to be achieved in Northern Ireland which cannot win the support, and attract the involvement, of both communities and their political representatives. Moreover, recognition of the equal validity of the Unionist identity and aspiration is now a basic tenet of modern Irish nationalism, as evidenced in the work of both the New Ireland Forum and the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation.

The process beginning on 10th June will pose historic challenges for all sides:

It will require difficult decisions on both sides of the Irish Sea. A settlement will not be achieved simply in the safe margins of traditional policies, or on the basis of



minimum necessary movement. Our joint undertakings must be translated into practice.

Both communities within Northern Ireland need to make a painful adjustment to the reality that their rights cannot be asserted in isolation from those who share the area, or the island, with them. Political consent is an essential requirement, whether in relation to the existing framework of Northern Ireland or any future all-Ireland framework. It must be earned rather than dictated.

For the Republican movement, the challenge is a renewed and unequivocal ceasefire, and an acceptance that a democratic commitment must be consistent, sustained, and made credible in the eyes of all those whose political cooperation is sought by Sinn Féin, and the wider public generally.

It is a significant and potentially historic move by the Republican movement that the commitment to a cessation of the campaign of violence has been related to the process of inclusive negotiations, rather than to an unrealistic insistence on their own preferred outcome to negotiations, as was the case before. It would be tragic for that reason, and for political confidence generally, if the credibility of the negotiating process were to be in any way undermined.

For that reason, it is important that the preparations for the negotiations should be as careful as possible.

The Governments set their sights high - to achieve a new beginning for relationships within Northern Ireland, within the island of Ireland and between the peoples of these islands, and to agree new institutions and structures to take account of those relationships.

The Ground Rules adopted by the two Governments make clear that there will be a comprehensive agenda reflecting this purpose and that they will work through it. While no outcome will be pre-determined or excluded in advance, it is accepted that any agreement will need to give adequate expression to the totality of all three relationships. The three-stranded structure of the negotiations, and the principle that nothing will be finally agreed in any one Strand until there is agreement in the negotiations as a whole, offer ample assurance that no partial or lop-sided outcome, for instance a purely internal settlement, is possible. Every participant in the negotiations will be able to raise any issue of relevance to it, including constitutional issues. Any party will be in a position to advance its own analysis of the situation, to advocate its own preferred outcome, and to seek to persuade others of the correctness of its approach.



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In addition both Governments have agreed that there will be a need for reciprocal confidence building measures. The February 28th Communiqué echoes a key passage of the Mitchell report, which cuts through the polemics and empty symbolism surrounding the decommissioning issue, and highlights what are valid concerns on both sides:

"Those who insist on prior decommissioning need to be reassured that the commitment to peaceful and democratic means by those formerly supportive of politically motivated violence is genuine and irreversible, and that the threat or use of violence will not be invoked to influence the process of negotiations or to change any agreed settlement.

Those who have been persuaded to abandon violence for the peaceful political path need to be reassured that a meaningful and inclusive process of negotiation is genuinely being offered to address the legitimate concerns of their traditions and the need for new political arrangements with which all can identify."

The need, in a nutshell, is to ensure that this issue is dealt with meaningfully and satisfactorily in the process of negotiations, without derailing the political negotiations which are the enabling condition for progress on all fronts - including of course the decommissioning issue itself.

The decommissioning issue is qualitatively different from most other prospective agenda items for the Talks. It deals with a situation which is in breach of the law, with the complex legal considerations that entails. Since it requires the cooperation of the paramilitary leaders in possession of such weapons, the negotiators around the table cannot decide the issue for themselves. In any case, I believe most parties would not wish to become immersed in its technicalities, provided the outcomes are satisfactory to them.

There is therefore, I believe, a strong argument in favour of remitting this issue in the first instance, under an independent outside aegis, to a separate but parallel stream of negotiations. In that way it could be processed and clarified for the consideration of the political negotiators, and the outcomes submitted to them for consideration alongside the results emerging from the political negotiations across the three strands. I noted with interest in the recent House of Commons debate that spokesmen from both sides of the divide felt the issue was too fundamental to be left vague until June 10th. I agree with that analysis and believe this approach should be explored with all relevant parties as of now. The baleful potential of the issue has been well demonstrated, and we must ensure that it does not eclipse the wider goal of political agreement.



Of course, the prospect of any progress on decommissioning depends directly on whether the negotiations are inclusive. The Governments have made clear that we want them to be, but also that Sinn Féin participation in negotiations requires an unequivocal restoration of the ceasefire of August 1994. Within the negotiating process, we expect all participants to subscribe to the six Mitchell principles. This latter is a very challenging step for Sinn Féin, but one they should muster the courage to take. We believe it is warranted by the need for extra confidence building measures to offset the understandable doubts engendered by the collapse of the ceasefire.

We have had some political debate here recently about the likely value of negotiations in the absence of Sinn Féin. I think both Governments are agreed that the prospects of success will be greatly enhanced if the negotiations are inclusive, as we want them to be. We agree also that no one party, from whichever side, can veto our joint search for a way out of this conflict.

I felt myself that some of the critics on this issue were, so to speak, looking through the wrong end of the telescope.

Rather than debating the viability of talks without Sinn Féin, I would prefer to focus on the special value of talks which include them. If we succeed in that goal we will have, for the first time ever, a complete spectrum of political opinion all around one table, and all formally dedicated to the search for a just and honourable settlement. If we can find agreement at that table, it will be real and lasting agreement. No-one need rise from it having to look over their shoulders at those certain to reject the outcome because they were not there.

Now is the time for all parties to commit themselves fully to achieving a lasting settlement through making the adjustments and compromises which are required of us all. It is common ground that the only way forward is to be found at the negotiating table and that we belong there. The scope, structure and organisation of the negotiations, and the principles which must underpin any settlement, have been painstakingly elaborated by the Governments. These essential parameters enjoy bipartisan support both in Dublin and at Westminster. The fundamental issues to be resolved have been exhaustively explored, are well known, and are deeply rooted in our history and its legacies. The realities we have to confront will not change.

To delay further would change nothing and would confer no advantage on anyone. What is more, to do so would be to betray the hopes of the vast majority of the Irish and British people. The consequences would be incalculable. The subsequent reconstruction of the conditions necessary for negotiations would be a long and even more difficult process than it has been. Trust would be still harder to develop.



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Both the nationalist and unionist communities have everything to gain through the achievement of a negotiated settlement.

Nationalists can look forward, for the first time, to some sense of ownership in the institutions under which they are governed. The principles of parity of esteem and equality of treatment would govern the actions of those institutions. The nationalist sense of an all-Ireland identity would enjoy practical expression and legal recognition.

Unionists can look forward to playing a much more direct and immediate role in their own government and to enjoying the ultimate security provided by the acceptance, by their neighbours and fellow-citizens, of the legitimacy of the new political dispensation.

Both communities can look forward to more responsive and accountable government, and to the economic and social benefits which increased North/South cooperation will bring. Above all, we have the chance to turn the page on a dark chapter of our history, and to leave to our children and posterity an Ireland permanently at peace with itself.

This Body, as one of the custodians, in a sense, of the wider British-Irish relationship, would appreciate particularly the impetus that such agreement would give to the strengthening of that relationship. The controversy whipped up around the Framework Documents drowned out one of its key messages: If Northern Ireland has been a stumbling block in our relationships in the past, it could, with agreement, become a positive bond of further understanding cooperation and friendship between the wider British and Irish democracies.

That is not least of the prizes we can reach for in these negotiations.