

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Statement by the Taoiseach, Mr. John Bruton, T.D.,
on Northern Ireland,

Dail Eireann, Thursday, 25 July 1996

A Ceann Comhairle,

Given the recent developments in the Northern Ireland situation, it would have been inappropriate to have a special Dáil session today and not devote some time to a discussion of what has happened.

A statement issued by the Church and Government Committee of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland earlier this week began with the stark sentence

"There are widespread feelings of fear, pain, confusion and stress throughout Ireland caused by the events of the last few weeks".

The statement went on to identify decisions on parades as the immediate cause of the fear, pain, confusion and stress. It went further, however, and pointed out that:

"The present situation requires the political process to be pursued positively which will involve courage and the taking of risks".

The heart of this problem, as every member of the House knows, is the long-standing failure to accommodate the three sets of relationships

- between the two communities in Northern Ireland
- between both parts of Ireland
- between Britain and Ireland

The difficulties created, for example, by parades is but one manifestation of the underlying political problem and it is for this reason that our major efforts are directed towards negotiating agreement on political structures which will accommodate the three sets of relationships.

Before dealing with the current political process, I would like to reiterate some points about the parades and the severe difficulties to which their handling gave rise. I have publicly made clear my view on the handling of the Portadown parade. The authorities of a democratic state - any state - cannot afford to

yield, or to be perceived to yield, to force or to the threat of force, cannot afford to be inconsistent, and cannot afford to be partial in the way they apply the law. These basic tenets of democracy were, I have argued, breached in the case of the Portadown parade.

As is now clear, there is a deficiency in the regime for dealing with controversial parades in Northern Ireland. In this respect, Northern Ireland is not Surrey. Nor is it Dublin or Galway. It is a divided community, with a long history of confrontational marches. That is why I have been pressing for a review of arrangements for dealing with parades, and I welcome the recent announcement of the Northern Ireland Secretary of State that the current arrangements are to be reviewed.

At present, the arrangements do not allow for sufficient weight to be given to the overall interests of community relations, and to the damage that may be done to community relations by allowing people parade through areas where they are not welcome. What happens now is that there is a morally offensive auction between competing threats of violence and disruption. The RUC is placed in a position where, in the interests, as they see it, of minimising harm, they make a calculation which involves essentially yielding to the greater threat of disorder.

The parades arrangements clearly need to be revised to accommodate the issue of the likelihood of long-term damage to community relations. It might be profitable to study South African legislation which takes into account factors such as preventing "the causing, encouraging or fermenting of feelings of hostility between different population groups or parts of population groups". It should be possible to have arrangements put in place in Northern Ireland under which the identities of the two traditions can be recognised and accommodated in this way.

Together with the Tánaiste, I will continue to monitor the parade situation closely. We are currently in discussion with the British authorities about possible upcoming flashpoints. We must not have a repetition of Garvaghy Road.

But no action or inaction on the part of the British Government in relation to Portadown justified the murder, the intimidation, the destruction of property and the general mayhem which followed it, right across Northern Ireland. Democracy fundamentally depends upon the principle that people are free to argue against, disagree with and criticise the decisions of lawful authority.

They are not free to disobey such decisions. To quote again from the Presbyterian Church statement:

"....the properly constituted authorities of the state are to be obeyed. Only under the most extreme circumstances can this obligation be refused. We do not believe that such circumstances obtained in recent times".

That is a courageous statement by the Presbyterian Church. I would go further. There has not been, nor is there now, any justification for the use of violence to achieve political objectives. This is particularly so when there are negotiations taking place, for which the only entry qualifications is that participating parties reject violence, or any support for violence.

Of course, all of us are frustrated at the pace of progress in these negotiations. After forty days, formal agreement has not yet been reached on the rules of procedure or on the agenda. This must, at the same time, be placed in the context of twenty five years of violence, and hundreds of years of division, supremacism, misunderstanding and fear. Procedural arguments, which can appear superficial to outsiders, can provide a means through which the participants acquire a sense of ownership of the process, thereby facilitating eventual agreements on issues of substance.

There have, however, been some recent encouraging developments and while I am inhibited by the confidentiality of the proceedings from giving details, I can say that we are working towards a situation where it might be possible to reach agreement before the holidays on many of the outstanding procedural issues and to pave the way for negotiations on the substantive issues after a short Summer recess.

These negotiations, involving the assistance of Senator Mitchell, General de Chastelain and Prime Minister Holkeri, represent by far the best opportunity that has existed in our lifetime to arrive at a political settlement to accommodate the three relationships.

All the relevant parties are there except Sinn Féin, and all Sinn Féin have to do to take their seats is persuade the IRA to restore the ceasefire.

All the relevant issues are on the table, and any participant can add any additional issue which he feels it necessary to discuss.

Both Governments have done an enormous amount of preparatory work to facilitate a successful outcome from the talks. Over the last forty days at the Belfast talks we have shown our willingness to work with other parties to the negotiations and to accommodate their viewpoints.

It is important that the political parties in the talks each take on their own responsibilities. The bigger the party the bigger is its responsibility - not to its own supporters - but to the entire community. The gainers in these talks will be those who take additional responsibility on their shoulders, rather than those who like to pass it to someone else.

I would wish to take this opportunity to emphasise three key points:

- the negotiations are serious and comprehensive and both Governments are committed to achieving a successful outcome
- we will not allow decommissioning to derail the negotiations. It will be tackled but only in parallel with other issues in the negotiations
- both Governments will do everything possible to promote confidence building during the talks. This has been explicitly recognised in the communiqué which Prime Minister Major and I issued in London on 28 February last.

I hope that these points will reassure the Republican Movement and finally convince them that now is the time to restore the ceasefire. Give the political process a chance. There has never been a better time.

To the unionist community, I repeat a message already articulated many times by myself and indeed by all my recent predecessors as Taoiseach. The principle of consent as set out in the Anglo-Irish Agreement and the Joint Framework Document is sacrosanct. There can be no change in the status of Northern Ireland unless and until a majority of the people there freely so decide.

There has never been a more favourable climate, or more constructive arrangements, for a successful negotiation. Again I say to Unionists, you have seen the economic prospects and the security which eighteen months of peace brought. How much more glittering is the prize which a lasting settlement would bring?

We respect your traditions, your heritage and your beliefs. We understand your fears and anxieties.

We ask only that you respect the traditions, the heritage and the beliefs of your nationalist neighbours and that you understand their fears and anxieties.

As the Presbyterian statement made clear, the achievement of success in the political negotiations will involve courage and the taking of risks. I want to assure the representatives of unionism with whom we are currently on negotiations that this Irish Government has courage and is ready to take risks.

I want also to assure everyone on this island and in Britain that we are leaving no stone unturned in our efforts to reach a settlement. I know that the British Prime Minister and his colleagues in Government share this commitment and, despite our recent disagreement, both Governments are continuing to work closely and constructively together to achieve the settlement that has eluded so many generations of Irish and British politicians.