



Statement by Dick Spring T.D., Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs

Seanad Éireann, Wednesday 16 October 1996

A Chathaoirleach,

I greatly welcome this opportunity to make a statement to the Seanad on the current situation in Northern Ireland.

As members of the Oireachtas it is our privilege, and our duty, to speak for the people of Ireland.

It is important for us to do so, especially at this time of great worry and perplexity in relation to Northern Ireland. The bright hopes we cherished so recently that we were at leaving behind the spectre of political violence are greatly dimmed, and may be quenched entirely.

We must speak out on behalf of all our people to condemn the wanton acts of violence which are the primary cause for the sense of betrayal and despair which is now so widespread.

It is also important to use our democratic fora to convey a sense of where the Government stands, and what our policy will be in the difficult choices we may be faced with.

In regard to the Lisburn bombs, and the other atrocities, or attempted atrocities, from Canary Wharf onwards, it is right and necessary to express the sense of national disgust and betrayal which is uppermost in all our minds. We must ensure that our moral senses are never blunted by the dreadful familiarity of atrocity. We must be careful to call right and wrong by their proper names. We extend the deepest sympathy to the family of Warrant Officer Bradwell, and to those injured in the attack. To them, and to all other

victims before them, we want to say that we abhor the terrible suffering visited on them.

We repudiate all attempts to justify it. We repudiate particularly any grotesque claim that it is done in the name of Ireland. The Ireland which is supposed to need such bloody offerings exists only in the warp of some closed minds. It has nothing to do with the Ireland we are trying to build, and offers it only misery and unending harm.

I could spend much time here dissecting the contradictions and absurdity of the present IRA campaign of violence but so many others, including the Taoiseach - and indeed Opposition leaders also - have done this so cogently in recent days that there is little new to add. Just as surely as violence destroys lives and livelihoods, it poisons the ground on which a political settlement must be built.

It is important that democratic representatives continue to be loud and clear in their condemnation. In this respect these Seanad statements are particularly valuable.

At the same time condemnation must not be made a substitute for policy. It is particularly important, at a time when anger and despair can be uppermost in the public mood, that Governments should steer a steady course. That is right in itself, and it is also the most telling resistance which can be offered to those who seek to dictate the political agenda through murder, bombs and bullets.

There are diverse views in this country on the origins and nature of the conflict in Northern Ireland, and how precisely it should be resolved. On certain matters however, the overwhelming majority of the Irish people, and their democratic representatives in both Houses, stand together in unanimity. The keystone of that consensus is peace. We wish to live together in peace, to foster social and economic growth in peace, to talk through and settle our differences in peace, to enjoy and respect our different traditions in peace. No Government policy is conceivable in Ireland which did not seek to serve as



fully and consistently as possible that fundamental commitment.

In doing so we must of course firstly maintain our strong defences against all those who would attempt to draw us down the violent path.

The first duty of any democratic state is to protect its citizens. For any group to take it upon themselves to use violence in our name is an attack, not just on the innocent victims of each atrocity but on the lifetimes of work of millions of Irishmen and women who have together built our society. The Garda Síochána and the Army are the instruments of the law and the preservers of the peace. Our security forces, like those in Northern Ireland and in Britain, with whom they co-operate so closely, have relentlessly pursued the men of violence, and their arms, for over twenty-five years. They have had substantial successes in containing and countering the threat of terrorism, not least this year: the Clonastee bomb factory was only the most spectacular and important of several excellent pieces of work. As the Minister for Justice reminded the Dáil last week, since August 1994 the Gardaí have recovered 600 illegally-held firearms; 30,000 rounds of ammunition; and 60 kilograms of semtex. The Gardaí - one of whom, Garda McCabe, made the ultimate sacrifice earlier this year - will continue to hunt down and punish the perpetrators of violence.

The work of peace, however, goes beyond the necessary defence of democratic institutions and values against overt or covert attack. Security measures alone will not eradicate the cancer of violence used for political ends. There is also a need to ensure, as far as humanly possible, that our political systems clearly offer the means to discuss and to manage the political problems or tensions which provide the soil where a culture of violence can take root. That is why we have sought to achieve a lasting and comprehensive political accommodation.

One could spend a life-time arguing the rights and wrongs of history. What is undisputable, is they have left Northern Ireland as a political entity suffering from a fundamental lack of political consensus. That is a source of political and social instability which has blighted so many aspects of life within Northern Ireland. It has also been very costly for this jurisdiction, which can never be insulated from its effect. When unionist leaders complain of interference they should first ask themselves - honestly - whether any Irish Government, whatever its ideological hue, could ever be truly indifferent to bad political stewardship and confrontation in Northern Ireland, when the repercussions for us are so direct and costly. Rather than construing our concern as a threat, they should understand that our natural and unmistakable interest in peace and stability is a strong and obvious foundation for a new partnership.

The parameters of a viable and fair accommodation of the Northern Ireland conflict have been elaborated in a long and difficult process of trial and error between the Irish and British democracies. They have been refined in a series of agreements and documents which enjoy, broadly speaking, bipartisan support in both Parliaments and are therefore reliable pointers to future policy.

These parameters include conspicuously the total rejection of violence, and of any attempt to mix politics and violence. They aim for the broadest possible application of the principle of consent. No one now seriously entertains the notion you can bomb nearly a million unionists into a united Ireland. Indeed it is obvious that one of the main casualties of IRA bombs has been the traditional ideology of a united Ireland itself. But the principle of consent in Ireland is a coin with two sides. Unionist failure to acknowledge its relevance to nationalists in Northern Ireland is one of the strongest barriers in the way of a new political dispensation, where the unionist position would be protected by the agreement of all.



It is broad common ground also that a political solution must address all the key relationships, and ensure parity of esteem and just and equal treatment for the identities and aspirations of both traditions and both communities. Unionists cannot be marginalised in their own country, and neither can nationalists. Equality and mutual respect are not just moral ideals - they are in practical terms the only ground on which the two communities can reach a stable equilibrium.

There is widespread agreement also that the Stormont Talks have, potentially at least, all the ingredients necessary for meaningful negotiations. They are inclusive in intent, and could become so in practice, subject only to decisions which lie in the hands of the Republican movement itself. They address all strands. They have a comprehensive agenda, with all issues unquestionably on the table. They have distinguished, expert and indeed very patient Chairmanship. They can be the vehicle for a meaningful accommodation, if the political will to reach it is there all round.

Progress in the Talks has been excruciatingly slow. Naturally we welcome as a positive step the agreement which has now been reached on the agenda for the remainder of the Opening Plenary. We hope all participants will use it briskly to get down as quickly as possible to the core purpose of the Talks - building new political relationships in place of those which have failed.

There have been suggestions that the slow progress was somehow due to the Governments dragging their feet, or standing around waiting for Sinn Féin to come in. Nothing could be further from the truth, as all the participants know.

We do indeed want to see an inclusive process in place. It would be very strange to want otherwise, or to view as anything other than a regrettable necessity the absence of representatives elected by a fairly sizeable constituency. It would be wrong to assume.

Because the IRA has blocked the door to Sinn Féin, that that constituency has thereby ceased to exist, or can simply be ignored into total insignificance. The stability - of a kind - which came from the politics of domination is no longer possible. The stability of the future, which we all want to see, will inevitably come from the politics of inclusion, by whatever route it is ultimately achieved.

That is why we have sought to maintain a consistent and careful balance on the issue of Sinn Féin participation.

We are democrats. We have a duty to encourage all those who seek a democratic mandate and commit themselves exclusively to the political path. We must give the necessary encouragement and support to those who are genuinely seeking a transition from violence to peace. At the same time we equally have a duty to make sure that this encouragement does not compromise our fundamental principles, or is viewed as weakness or vacillation in the face of terror. It is not easy to maintain that careful balance without being attacked for being either soft on terrorism, or blind to the potential of the peace process. Nevertheless I believe this consistent balance is right and should be maintained.

From the start, it has been made clear to Sinn Féin, as to the loyalists, that dialogue with them, and their inclusion in the negotiations, depends on their commitment to peaceful and democratic means. The ending of the IRA ceasefire in February led immediately to the end of political-level contact with Sinn Féin, and it is the reason why they have remained outside the talks. Likewise, while Sinn Féin's entry to negotiations continues to depend on an unequivocal restoration of the ceasefire, once inside they would be subject to the same disciplines as all other participants. They would have to make clear their total and absolute commitment to the Mitchell principles of democracy and non-violence, including the renunciation of the use of force, or threats of force, to influence the course



for the outcome of all-party negotiations. We would expect them to work constructively and in good faith to secure the implementation of all aspects of the Report of the International Body, in the context of an inclusive and dynamic process in which mutual trust and confidence are built as progress is made on all the issues of concern to all participants.

We have sought to ensure a bridge for Sinn Féin out of the wilderness of their self-imposed isolation and into the democratic arena. To date the IRA have not allowed them to cross that bridge. It is not clear if they ever will. But it remains there for them. We still hope they will cross it, and will do so soon, before the spiral of violence becomes irreversible. If and when they do cross it, and have made it clear that they will not return to the other side, they will be treated like everyone else. They will have no more influence than that to which their support and the force of their arguments entitle them, and also no less.

There is no doubt, just as the consistent observance of the ceasefire has enhanced the credibility and standing of the Loyalist parties, the collapse of the IRA ceasefire was an enormous blow to the credibility of the Sinn Féin leadership. The credibility gap which has to be bridged has widened with each successive atrocity.

Nevertheless, the futility of violence stands out in sharper relief than ever before. The logic of a whole-hearted commitment to the political path as the only way forward is cogent as never before. We must not, in our anger or despair, gratuitously slam any door. Wiser counsels must one day prevail and it would be foolish to foreclose the capacity of our democratic system as a whole to respond wisely in turn.

Furthermore, we must not treat entry to negotiations as a kind of certificate of approval to be bestowed only on the like-minded. Political dialogue and negotiations should more



accurately be seen as a duty on all political leaders with any contribution to make.

Disqualification should therefore relate to the minimum that is required to protect the political basis and fairness of the negotiating process as a level and strictly democratic playing field for all participants. In the Downing Street Declaration and in the February Communiqué the two Governments set out that minimum threshold. We should certainly not lower it, and neither should we raise it to new and unrealistic heights.

While we are clear on our preference for a fully inclusive process, we are determined also to exploit to the full whatever option for political dialogue is available to us. The two Governments carry a heavy burden of responsibility in leading the process and in demonstrating that there is reason for hope even in the darkest days. We are in constant contact at all levels, in particular in an intensive and practical fashion at the Stormont talks. At all stages we have taken initiatives to move the debate forward, and to offer the parties ways out of the very great difficulties in which we find ourselves. We will continue to devote all our energies to making the political negotiations work.

Even before the negotiations started, we knew they were not going to be smooth or straightforward. As the Taoiseach has rightly stated, the negotiations are not about fine-tuning aspects of public administration: they are about nothing less than achieving a settlement which can win the adherence and consent of two communities which have traditionally seen their identities as diametrically opposed to one another and their aspirations as irreconcilable. In any context this would be a profoundly difficult task, even though I remain convinced that the two Governments have succeeded in defining the principles for, and sketching a possible outline of, an honourable and balanced agreement. Moreover, the poisonous legacies of violence, sectarianism and injustice continue to wreak their havoc, and to infect fresh generations.

Many of us expressed the hope that the shocking events of the summer would have forced a reappraisal on all sides of what was at stake, and of the risks of political failure. I have

May that while there has been some evidence of this - largely among those whose commitment to peace and agreement was already clear - a depressing amount of political energy has been wasted on to the selective and distorted elaboration of fresh mythologies, and the restocking of already ample inventories of historic recrimination.

Much of the current difficulties in the process derive from the vexed question of decommissioning.

I have put on record on many occasions, in this House and elsewhere, exactly where I, and the Government, stand on this matter. I am aware of, and grateful for, the widespread support which exists for that stand throughout this House, and more widely. Nevertheless, our views continue to be misinterpreted and misunderstood. To suggest that this is a complex question which will, in practice, only be resolved voluntarily and by agreement is to lay oneself open to the charge of being some kind of IRA fellow traveller or apologist. Still worse, it is to invite the accusation that one is indifferent to the terrible suffering caused by illegally held weapons and explosives, above all in Northern Ireland.

Let me seek, once again, to set the record straight. First of all, if it were within my power, or indeed, I am sure, that of any member of this House, every item in the paramilitary arsenals, down to the last bullet, would be destroyed tomorrow. This generation has definitively rejected the use of violence for any political purpose whatsoever, and repudiates and disowns the perpetrators.

Secondly, while, as I emphasised earlier, our security forces continue to work for the total disarmament of all paramilitaries, we must not confuse that continuing security commitment with the essentially political goal of voluntary decommissioning by those holding illegal weapons. As is clear from the experience of countries which are substantially less democratic and open than ours, security measures alone, no matter how severe, are simply incapable of eradicating violence which, as is the case in Northern



Ireland, has deep roots in our history, and is intimately linked with fundamental political disagreements. Only an approach based on dialogue and persuasion offers the hope of a lasting accommodation.

Full decommissioning in the sense of the Mitchell Report will only come about on a voluntary basis. This logically and necessarily requires the cooperation of those actually holding the weapons. Decommissioning will not come about by making peremptory demands upon the paramilitaries, irrespective of the political context. Any peremptory approach belongs inevitably to the security dimension.

The decommissioning question has bedevilled the political atmosphere for eighteen months. For a long time, it looked as if the two divergent sets of strongly-held opinions might be irreconcilable.

But the International Body established by the two Governments showed great skill and balance in devising a road map which showed us the way forward. From the start, the Irish Government has supported its analysis and recommendations. Before the talks began in June, we, together with the British Government, committed ourselves to an approach whereby all participants in the negotiations should work constructively and in good faith to implement all aspects of the Report. That remains our approach now. It is the only realistic approach to achieving the goal, and preventing the decommissioning issue wrecking the political talks.

Senator Mitchell and his colleagues made quite clear that decommissioning would only happen in the context of political agreement. Progress on decommissioning, and political progress, would be mutually reinforcing. In our Communiqué of 28 February, the two Governments, borrowing the language of the Report, identified that confidence-building at the start of negotiations would, in addition to commitment to the Mitchell principles, and an address to the proposals on decommissioning,

“require that the parties have reassurance that a meaningful and inclusive process of negotiations 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 International Body made clear that agreement on practical decommissioning arrangements based on the principles set out in the Report, required complex discussions of a technical nature, in which all concerned with the issue would have to take part.

In addition, decommissioning would happen only on a mutual basis, that is through the involvement of both sets of paramilitaries. That mutuality will plainly only be possible if all parties are present at the negotiations.

Actual decommissioning will only happen, therefore, as a result of intensive discussions running alongside political negotiations in which both Sinn Féin and the two loyalist parties are full participants. It will be the fruit of an inclusive peace process, or it will not happen at all.

The proposal published a fortnight ago by the two Governments reiterated our commitment to work with all other participants in the negotiations to implement all aspects of the International Body's report. We suggested that a Committee be established to work to secure that goal, operating in parallel with the substantive political negotiations. As a demonstration of our good faith, and of our determination to ensure that there would be no blockages on our part, both Governments have said that they would introduce enabling decommissioning legislation in their respective Parliaments so that, as progress is made on political issues, the legislative framework would be enacted by Christmas. We have committed ourselves to publish that proposed legislation as soon as possible. The Irish Government would also make available a range of expert personnel, including independent experts of international standing whom we would envisage playing



an appropriate part in the work of a Verification Commission when it is established.

We are continuing to work intensively with the other participants in the negotiations to find a way forward which would offer a realistic chance of progress on this issue, and would not stimulate either dangerous anxieties or unrealistic hopes.

The very real emotional force, as well as the practical importance, of the decommissioning question has been underscored by the Lisburn bombs. There is, very understandably, a profound reluctance to come face-to-face with those who have over the years excused or supported the great hurts inflicted upon the unionist people in an effort to coerce them. There is, also, a continuing anxiety the threat of violence might be used alongside negotiations, or by diehard elements, even after the achievement of agreement. I do not for a moment say that these fears are unreal. But when examined they can surely be put in perspective. And it would be defeatist and unwise to exploit them, or rely on them, to justify a refusal to negotiate. To risk the shipwreck of the negotiations on the rock of decommissioning would seem to confirm the primacy of the military over the political, and to demonstrate the futility of dialogue and an abdication of politics. To insist on an approach to decommissioning which disregards the wisdom of the International Body's Report would, in essence, guarantee that decommissioning would never happen.

Unionists should have confidence in the continued commitment of the security forces on both sides of the border, as well as in their own continuing determination not to be intimidated. They should have confidence in the commitment of the two Governments and of all of the other parties now in the negotiations to the Mitchell principles, which include a firm requirement that the use, or threat, of force to influence the course or outcome of the negotiations be renounced. They should have confidence in the legislative basis for the negotiations, and the rules of procedure, which between them offer ample safeguards. The principle of sufficient consensus, and the commitment by both Governments to put the outcome of negotiations to referendum North and South, are

cumulative guarantees that no unacceptable blueprint will be forced upon them.

Not least, they should have confidence in the overwhelming nationalist commitment to the principle that there can be no change in the constitutional status of Northern Ireland without the consent of a majority. That commitment has in recent years transformed the Irish Government's approach to Northern Ireland, and means that we have no higher priority than the achievement of genuine agreement among the people of Northern Ireland, and reconciliation between North and South. It also means that Northern nationalists, too, are fully aware of the parameters which will frame a settlement.

Unionists, in sum, ought to draw confidence from the position in which they start negotiations. Of course, it would be wrong, and pointless, to assure them that reaching agreement will not involve hard choices on their part - just as it would be wrong and pointless to offer such assurances to nationalists and republicans. The shared principles on which the British and Irish Governments have agreed, and which command broad support in both jurisdictions, imply that serious and meaningful change within Northern Ireland, and in its wider relationships, is necessary if, for the first time, its institutions are to reflect and accommodate the diverse identities and aspirations of its two communities. Without that, there can be no real stability. I offer that assessment not in pursuit of any hidden agenda, but in recognition of the needs and ambitions of the nationalist community within Northern Ireland itself. But if unionists could themselves, as a community, make that imaginative leap, and approach the negotiations in that spirit, then I am certain that they would emerge from them in a position which, though different, had been fundamentally strengthened, not weakened, through a fresh partnership with their nationalist neighbours.

We all need to ask ourselves: which is better, the sterile certainty of political failure, and the vacuum it would create, or the constructive adventure of political negotiation, which offers the hope of a better future for all? The Irish Government, for its part, stands firmly



on the side of engagement and dialogue. It is well past time that, together, we seized the opportunity which still exists and which we can still shape to our common benefit.