

Multi-Party Negotiations: Plenary Session, 3 June 1997

Opening Statement on behalf of Irish Government

Mr Chairman

My first duty, a pleasant one, is to welcome you and your colleagues, Prime Minister Holkeri and General de Chastelain, back to Ireland. During previous sessions of the negotiations, your skill and tenacity have won you immense respect around this table, and we look forward again to working under your guidance during the coming months.

The Irish Government delegation differs from the rest of the delegations here in that we have not, during the past few weeks, as yet actually gone through an election. As you will be aware, this deficiency is shortly to be remedied. No election result is entirely predictable, especially in an electoral system as complex and finely-balanced as ours. Let me reassure all those around the table who might be worried about the election producing the wrong result that we look forward to meeting you all again shortly refreshed in mandate, as well as in body and spirit.

The inevitable polemics of any election campaign should not obscure the extent and solidity of the inter-party consensus on Northern Ireland which exists in our jurisdiction. There are minor differences of tone and emphasis between us, and occasional divergences on detail. But across all the significant parties in our jurisdiction there is a shared view of the key principles and broad outline of a settlement, and of how such a settlement should be achieved. That view derives from something deeper than party policy. It reflects the strong desire of the population in general for a just and lasting, and above all a peaceful, resolution of this conflict. I am confident, therefore, that any Irish Government would pursue

broadly the same line as we have done, and would not substantially dissent from the views we have expressed and will continue to express.

In these negotiations, we are fast approaching a defining moment. How we collectively confront the choice ahead of us will have enduring consequences, not just for the present process, but for the very concepts of political negotiation and of an agreed political settlement. And if we prove ourselves unable, as democratic representatives, to reach agreement, we will be failing in our duty to show that there is an alternative to a never-ending cycle of violence and sectarianism.

A society, or a political system, which cannot accommodate difference and cannot peacefully resolve disagreement will not develop and grow. Nobody would deny the depths of tension, bitterness and anger which now exist here, and which can explode into shocking violence. The quite ghastly murder of Constable Taylor symbolises the thinness of the crust upon which we are conducting our negotiations. It is of course too simplistic to draw a direct line between our inability up to now to make political progress and appalling events of this sort. But our success or failure will, at the very least, profoundly affect the psychological climate, for good or ill. The stakes are too high for us to shirk our responsibilities.

Put simply, we must find a way of doing better than we did before the adjournment on 5 March. Our respective publics saw in our failure to advance into negotiations on the core political questions which we are committed to discuss a deeply disillusioning spectacle. Opinion surveys have shown little interest in, and few expectations of, our work. This despite the fact that we have many potential assets to hand, if we are willing to use them, including we have great international goodwill, symbolised and expressed in the persons of our three Independent

Chairmen. We have, in the carefully-crafted structures of negotiation and rules of procedure, a set of arrangements which are fair to every party and which should allow for comprehensive discussion. Many, indeed most, parties may dislike that some aspect or other of their organisation and structure, or find them cumbersome - although in my view both the ground rules and the rules of procedure allow for considerable flexibility and even potential efficiency in how we agree to organise our business. But it is vain to believe that the fundamental issues we face will go away, or that they will ever be other than difficult to resolve. Resolve, imagination, and mutual trust and the essential ingredients of any deal, and matter much more than particular systems or rules, useful though those may be.

The issues we are committed to discuss are profoundly important. We differ in many respects on how they should be resolved. But that makes genuine debate and negotiation between us more, not less, imperative. Moreover, I am convinced that the gaps between us are not unbridgeable - that, indeed, on many matters, despite the levels of misunderstanding and bitterness which exist so visibly, nationalists and unionists are not further apart, but closer together than they were some years ago, in terms of their analysis and expectations of the principles and the parameters of a settlement.

This places a heavy onus on all of us who take justifiable pride in our commitment to democratic politics to find a way ahead. Politics is not about glorifying or reinforcing differences, but about resolving them. We simply cannot, therefore, go on as we have done. That would be a betrayal of our obligations to the people of Ireland, above all of Northern Ireland, have suffered so much and who want something better. I hesitate to quote from the South African experience, given that so many of you were there so recently. But the words of Cyril Ramaphosa in

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Belfast last year strike true: "The challenge to all parties is to capture the moment, to have that desire, and to make sure that it gives the prospect of negotiations sufficient impetus to see to it that a solution is attainable."

Of course, if we are successfully to move into real negotiations on questions of substance, then we must, finally, find a way of handling decommissioning to the satisfaction of all but without blocking the negotiations. I do not want to anticipate the more detailed discussions which we must have in the coming days or weeks on this issue. However, I want firmly to place on record once again the firm and unshakeable resolve of the Irish Government to achieve the complete disarmament of all paramilitary organisations. We are absolutely committed to this goal, and I know that the parties here all share this objective - which is, after all, the second of the six principles of democracy and non-violence to which we have all explicitly committed ourselves. Our security forces have devoted great energy and resources over many years to hunting down such weapons and those who use them, with considerable success. The only question is how in practice the decommissioning of those weapons and explosives which still remain beyond the reach of the security forces is to be achieved, and how those who hold such weapons can be persuaded to renounce both the will to use weapons, and the weapons themselves.

I would simply ask all the parties here to reflect calmly upon this question, and to offer a realistic and reasonable response to it. I accept that the decommissioning issue is of great symbolic importance, and that very symbolism may be counterproductive to achieving the actual goal itself. Moreover, the nature of its symbolism varies dramatically when viewed from different perspectives. It means very different things to different people. We should not allow those clashing symbolisms to prevent us from dealing with the issue in a practical and constructive

way. Still less should we allow them to mesmerise us into a trance of inactivity and despair. We must work towards the objective of decommissioning, as we would work towards any other important objective, with an eye to finding the path most likely actually to lead to that goal. We must see the undoubted difficulties as challenges to be overcome, not as so many proofs of bad faith, or pretexts for obstruction.

The decommissioning issue has to be resolved, but logically this can happen only voluntarily and on a basis of persuasion and compromise, not peremptorily. The Irish Government continues to believe that it is through the implementation of the Report of the International Body in all its aspects that decommissioning will in fact be achieved. I guarantee that we will spare no effort to ensure that this approach succeeds, once it has been agreed and endorsed by those of us at the negotiations. No action or inaction of ours will be allowed to hamper the attainment of this objective. We have already manifested our good faith through the placing on our statute book of the Decommissioning Act, 1997, and we stand ready to take such other necessary steps as may facilitate progress on this issue.

There is, I think, general acceptance that decommissioning will only be achieved through a fully inclusive process. We also continue to believe that such a process offers the best chance of success in reaching a lasting settlement - as President Clinton observed last week in London, and is indeed obvious from the facts of the case. The debate should not be about whether that is the best approach, but rather whether it can be implemented on the basis of the strict criteria set out by both Governments.

We want Sinn Féin to be a part of this process. They too say that they want to be.

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But the key to the gates is in their hands. They know perfectly well what they have to do. The conditions for their entry have been rehearsed by both Governments on many occasions. There has to be an unequivocal restoration of the IRA ceasefire - the sooner the better. Our officials have, in their recent contacts, hammered home the message that we want a lasting cessation, and will not stand for any cynical and tactical manoeuvring between peace and democracy, on the one hand, and violence and coercion on the other.

The ball is now very much in the republican movement's court. We hope that they will act in the only way which is compatible with their stated wish for genuine negotiation and the resolution of conflict by exclusively peaceful and democratic means. But the patience of the two Governments must not be presumed to be inexhaustible. Recent Events of the last few days have raised further questions about the intentions of republicans and these are questions which can only be answered by an unequivocal restoration of the ceasefire and adherence to the Mitchell principles.

It is clearly apparent that Sinn Féin represents a sizeable proportion of the Northern Ireland electorate. It is the third largest party in this jurisdiction. There are conflicting views as to why this is now so, or whether it is a good thing. But, irrespective of the answers to these questions, it becomes still more important that, always provided it meets the tests of democracy and non-violence, Sinn Féin should be permitted and encouraged, on a basis of equality, to put forward its analysis and to work towards its aspirations in representing the views of its electorate. In so doing, as was the case in the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation, it, like every other party, will have its views examined and robustly challenged.

Once again I would stress, however, that the last thing we want is to see *any* significant party absent from the negotiating table. Both technically, in function of the rule of sufficient consensus, and as a political essential, the negotiations need both communities to be authoritatively represented. Subject only to the key criterion of democratic commitment, no party should seek to escape the need to engage with those whose views it does not share, and whose objectives may be unpalatable to it. No party can be allowed to determine whether any other can or cannot participate.

It is of course essential that all parties fully honour and adhere to their commitments to the six Mitchell principles, which form an essential element of these negotiations' terms of reference. The principles are not merely verbal formulae, but represent the only real basis on which democratic interaction is possible. Nor should their application be seen as constituting a mechanism for exclusion, but rather as a reinforcement of our common democratic purpose. The Irish Government nevertheless believes that no sustained and deliberate departure from the principles is compatible with a good faith involvement in the search for political agreement. It is a matter of grave concern to us, and to opinion in our jurisdiction, that loyalist violence raises questions about the continuing stability of the CLMC ceasefire.

We recognise that certain acts may have been committed by groupings outside the CLMC umbrella, and we acknowledge the genuine efforts being made by the representatives of the two loyalist parties to stabilise the situation. We have seen at first hand at this table the quality of the contribution being made by the PUP and the UDP, and we recognise the recent enhancement of their democratic mandates. They have a real and worthwhile role to play. But it is now important, as we resume the negotiations, that ways are found to offer further reassurance that there

is no ambiguity or uncertainty about their commitment to the Mitchell principles, and that no future acts or words should threaten their place amongst us.

Participation in negotiations, however, does not represent a reward or an end in itself, but a crucible in which ideas are tested. Whatever is unrealistic or unattainable in any party's position will evaporate in the fire of debate. Only through compromise can agreement be reached. That compromise must be firmly based on the principles put forward by the two Governments in the Joint Declaration, and endorsed by the great majority of political parties on the island. The principle of consent offers the unionist community the certainty and security that there can be no change in the status of Northern Ireland without the consent of a majority of its people. Equally, however, both justice and stability will be served only by the creation of a radically new dispensation in which both communities feel an equal sense of ownership and belonging and where the principle of consent is seen to apply to both communities. The challenge all of us face in these negotiations is not merely, or even largely, how to achieve our own objectives, but how to persuade others that their interests and aspirations have been adequately protected and expressed.

Belfast's new Lord Mayor, to whom I extend warmest congratulations, has said eloquently that the breaking of the political mould in his city is a bold step towards the creation of a partnership between the two political traditions - a partnership in which there is neither victory nor defeat but the triumph of tolerance. That partnership must be the objective not just for Belfast, but for Northern Ireland, for Ireland as a whole, and indeed for the two islands.

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It is now high time that we seriously began to confront the challenge. The prize of peace and agreement remains as glittering as it was last June. But we must show greater urgency and ingenuity in finding ways in which we can begin to approach it. These negotiations offer an opportunity which will not easily be reconstructed.

Now is the time for us to begin our work in earnest. Let us resolve to complete it together, in the interests of all the people we represent..