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PRIME MINISTER'S SPEECH AT ULSTER FOLK AND TRANSPORT MUSEUM, CULTRA  
18 DECEMBER 1996

JOHN MAJOR

It's never a hardship to come to Northern Ireland and as on every other occasion I've enjoyed the varied experiences that one always has here. Failing to land at Dungannon in fog, arriving by road more or less on the same day I was intended to, but then having the opportunity to talk and listen to so many experienced views about what is actually happening on the ground in Northern Ireland. I'm not a starry-eyed optimist, I believe in looking at the reality of what has happened and we might as well honestly acknowledge to ourselves that we've hit a sticky patch in Northern Ireland at the moment and the last few months have been difficult. And I think it is worth making that point because I see that from my own particular area in London, Paddy sees that from his day to day responsibilities in Northern Ireland, but you see that from your day to day activities within Northern Ireland either in the partnership schemes or in the various aspects of community relations work that I've had the opportunity of discussing briefly with you over the last few moments. Is it going to change? Is it going to get better? Well I believe that it is, but I will tell you one or two other things I believe as well, I've never believed we're going to snap our fingers and everything that we wish to achieve in Northern Ireland is suddenly magically going to change in precisely the direction, with precisely the good humour that we expect, it isn't going to be like that. It was always going to be a long, perhaps a hard grinding road to get in the direction that we wish to go. But before I say about where we are just let me cast your minds back a few years, of course in the last six months of this year, post-Drumcree particularly, it has been a difficult period particularly for those of you I know in community relations in one respect and a few days through the old suspicions straight back in the trenches from where we had taken some time trying to get them to emerge, but go back four or five years and then look at the changed atmosphere, the changed nature of the way the debate is conducted, the sort of meetings that take place that could never possibly have taken place just four or five years ago. Now I know that seems a long time and I know that it is so frustrating that it isn't faster to think of 20 years in which nothing happened at all except positions getting more and more entrenched and then think of the developments there have been in the past five years and then I think there is every reason for optimism and hope rather than people being depressed because the speed of progress we seem to be making until the middle of this year has slowed a little. What you do on the ground is as crucial a part of changing the face of Northern Ireland as anything else, we will not impose a new Northern Ireland from above, you will create a new Northern Ireland from the grass roots, that is where it will effectively be done if it is going to last and be real and is solid



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and that is why the work that you do is so very important in so many ways.

If I could say a word first about the partnerships. The European Union often gets a pretty bad press, it gets a very bad press but then don't we all, in the United Kingdom but in fact the European Union has a very high recognition of the special factors and the special problems of Northern Ireland and I think it has been very generous to Northern Ireland and I'm very grateful for what the European Union has sought to do and I encourage them to go on doing it in the future because there is a lot still to be done. And talking to many of you about the different partnership schemes, the very large ones that have, in some cases, millions of pounds to play with that and the smaller ones that have hundreds of thousands of pounds to play with, there was one word that kept emerging when I asked you what you did with your money and the word inclusive or inclusiveness became repeated both from those looking after the large schemes and those looking after the small schemes, and if there was one word that is going to change the face of Northern Ireland in the years to come I suspect that is the right word, inclusiveness. If people are going to come together so that it does not matter which side of the divide they come from in terms of their employment, in terms of where they live, in terms of where they go to school, in terms of their personal relationships, if we can get that inclusiveness to become an established pattern from childhood upwards, rather than the divisions that so often had been developed from childhood upwards in previous generations, then I think you'll build more solidly for the future of Northern Ireland than any politician ever could. So I am very grateful for what you do on the partnership schemes, I've learned over the last few minutes how bureaucratic it is that you have to fill in 27 pages for the European Union before you get your money. I'm bound to say, given my experience, 27 pages is far less than it might have been. Nonetheless I will mention that and see if there is something that can be done about reducing the bureaucracy, but thank you for the work you're doing on the ground. It'll build up and if you build the foundation soundly I'm sure the end product for Northern Ireland will be very real.

For those of you in community relations I think there are several things really I would wish to say. The first is simply thank you, because it is not an easy job anywhere at any time, you need people to help with community relations when there is a fracture in community relations so self-evidently it is never an easy job but when you have some of the events you've had to face in the last six months I know it is a particularly difficult job and it takes a certain amount of courage and mental hardness to carry on with that job and do it, but I'm very grateful to you for doing so and I know there's been a vast range of different community relations activities that we have been talking about. And again, if I may pursue the same theme for a moment, community relations isn't handed down from the Northern Ireland Office, of course there is a role for the Northern Ireland Office and for the Councils. But it is when it goes in the other direction that it is going to be most effective



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and I know that the majority of the people I have met over the last hour or so actually operate community relations in that direction and do so it seems to me with some courage and great skill. What other factor is there that might make your tasks easier? I think there is one, it's a very material factor in every sense of the word, material in that it makes a difference and material in that it is concerned with people's material well being and that is the prosperity of Northern Ireland. If Northern Ireland is not prosperous and long-term unemployment goes on and more people live longer without jobs, without prospects, without hopes then you are trying to fight very hard to improve the atmosphere and remove the sectarian divides. If you have a Northern Ireland that is getting more prosperous, where there is more investment, where there are more jobs then you are finding events are working with you rather than working against you as they have done so often in the history of Northern Ireland over the last quarter of a century or so. That is why the changing economic prospects for Northern Ireland are so vitally important. By today's very dramatic drop in unemployment in Northern Ireland taking it below 10% for the first time I think in 16 years or so, is very encouraging, not because it was a one off drop, because it is part of a continuing trend and we can expect the reduction to continue though, I doubt it will continue at quite the same dramatic rate we have seen at the moment. But the fact that it is falling, the fact that the international examinations of the UK economy suggest that our economy is going to grow very fast, not just this year but next year and the year after, at least gives every indication to believe that that job creation programme, that natural job creation programme of people who have markets and who will want to employ people is going to continue. So we are going to have events working with us over the next few years. There is just one other thing I wish to say and then Paddy I will shut-up because I have gone on too long. There is just one other thing. During that precious 17 months when we had no violence you could see, feel even a change in the economic atmosphere in Northern Ireland. You could see people being prepared to invest in Northern Ireland, you could see the change in Belfast city centre in terms of what was actually happening in the shops and in the opportunities and there is outside Northern Ireland a huge wall of investment money prepared to come into Northern Ireland and invest in Northern Ireland in your future prosperity and jobs, just as soon as they believe you have got a secure security situation and an end to violence. So if we have the economy moving in our direction, and we have and the fall in unemployment moving in our direction, and we have, and the extra help from the European Union, and we have and the well established community relation structure, as we have, the missing ingredient that will accelerate, I believe, all these things in the right direction is to try and put the peace process back on track so that people not only can see the other things that are happening and can have a realistic hope that the politicians and the divided parties can reach an accommodation in the interests of all the people of Northern Ireland. That is what I would like to seek to do, I look forward to the day, if I may borrow the word again, when we can credibly, credibly have inclusive talks that will enable the representatives of the constitutional parties and others to get



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together and see if we can build on the progress that has been made in the peace process so far. That is the missing piece of the jigsaw, the other pieces are in place, I will do what I can, I know Paddy will, I know many other people will to try and properly and credibly put that missing piece of the jigsaw on the board. So I think there is quite a lot to be optimistic about. Somebody said to me just over there, who had been working in community relations for 25 year, I think he said there is every reason for hope and optimism in Northern Ireland. I believe that too. The Christmas message was pretty hopeful and optimistic nearly 2,000 years ago, I think we can be hopeful and optimistic now, I am, I hope you are. Thank you for your hospitality today and I wish you a happy Christmas and please God, a peaceful New Year.