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Luncheon Address by the Taoiseach to Parliamentary Press
Gallery at the House of Commons - 19 February 1986

I am happy to have this opportunity to speak to you about Anglo-Irish relations and the Anglo-Irish Agreement.

May I first say that my Government was greatly heartened by the overwhelming support given to the Agreement by members of the House of Commons on both the Government and Opposition Benches, and by the declarations of welcome from the leaders of the Labour Party, the Liberal Party and the SDP. We are conscious that this support provides a firm basis for the operation of the Agreement now and in the future. If I may borrow a phrase from your domestic political vocabulary, this Agreement is not for turning!

In our own Parliament, the Dail, the Opposition voted against the Agreement but has since made clear that it will not obstruct its operation in any way. Our opinion polls have shown a remarkable and increasing degree of popular support for the Agreement - the level is now at 69%. There is no doubt about the clear wish of our Parliament and our voters to give the Agreement a chance to work and prove itself.

From the international community too there has been full support particularly from our friends in the European Community, in the United States, in Canada, in Australia and in New Zealand. We welcome that support and the willingness which has been expressed to contribute in a tangible way to the success of the Agreement. This international support is particularly encouraging.

You will of course reasonably ask: But what about the people of Northern Ireland itself? It is clear from the recent by-elections that Nationalists stand by the Agreement and wish to see it succeed. The transfer of support from Sinn Fein - the Party of the Armalite and the Ballot - to the

constitutional nationalism of the SDLP is evidence that the Agreement is doing what it was designed to do even before it has had time to bring any of the real changes in the areas outlined in the Agreement. I mean improved relations between the security forces and the community, improved confidence in the administration of justice, and the protection of human rights and the prevention of discrimination, and the recognition of the identity of the Nationalist as well as the Unionist tradition.

On the Unionist side there has been strong opposition from political leaders as we had anticipated from their public statements in the months leading up to the Agreement. The political campaign of the OUP and DUP has also been tainted by a paramilitary presence which is a cause of worry to ordinary Unionists as indeed is the extremism of some of the statements made and actions suggested. The response of the Unionist Community to this Agreement is for Unionists themselves to ponder and to work out. I will only repeat what I have already said to Unionists: This Agreement is no threat to your identity and way of life now or in the future. If you face a threat it comes from within your own ranks as you now decide your course of action. We are formally pledged to no change in the status of Northern Ireland until a majority there consent to it. We are formally committed to enhance Cross-Border Security Cooperation. These are central issues for Unionists. As evidence gathers of the sincerity of our pledge on status and the effectiveness of our commitment to security cooperation - a commitment which already has borne fruit - I believe Unionists will change to a more positive view of the Agreement.

In this United Nations Year of Peace, the Agreement has been recognised as an example of the success of negotiation, diplomacy and of the rule of law opposed to violence. It is the result of the will of our two Governments to tackle the problem of Northern Ireland at its root - how to accommodate the differing identities of its two communities.

The Agreement is the most important event in Anglo-Irish relations since the Irish State was established sixty five years ago: in a sense, it has redefined our relations. The crisis of alienation, instability and violence in Northern Ireland showed that such a redefinition could not be delayed. Partial measures within the existing narrow political context had failed. The Agreement sets out to widen that context, to provide a new framework on which lasting solutions can be built.

The Agreement has important broad objectives. It seeks to promote peace and stability in Northern Ireland; it seeks to reconcile the main political traditions in the island of Ireland, to improve the relations of the people of Britain and Ireland and to confront, through increased security cooperation, the common threat which we all face from violence and terror. The two Governments recognise that both communities in Northern Ireland have legitimate rights and aspirations which must be equally acknowledged, that relations between unionists and nationalists must be based on mutual recognition, respect and acceptance of each others rights. The Agreement, through the Intergovernmental Conference, has set up the machinery to ensure that the process of reconciliation takes place.

Our two Governments are committed to work together to implement the Agreement and do so as friendly neighbours and as partners in Europe. We are determined that peace and reconciliation will replace the terror and violence of the past.

As a result of the Agreement nationalists have been given new hope. The Agreement recognises as a valid objective their aspiration to a united Ireland. Unionists also stand to gain by the Agreement. It takes nothing away from their rights and it holds out a prospect of peace and stability in which all the people of Northern Ireland stand to benefit. It holds out the prospect also of the opportunity for both communities to participate in the structures of Government through a system of devolved Government which would have wide cross community support.

Progress in the political area - including devolution - is obviously extremely important. Of equal importance is the whole area of security. The initial meetings of the Intergovernmental Conference have concentrated on relations between the security forces and the minority community in Northern Ireland, ways of enhancing security cooperation between the two Governments and measures which would give substantial expression to the aim of underlining the importance of public confidence in the administration of justice. The three meetings of the Conference held to date and the sub-group comprising the Secretary of State, our Minister for Justice and the two Attorneys General which met last week have had detailed discussions on these matters.

I would recall here that in the Joint Communique issued at Hillsborough, I indicated that against the background of early progress in these matters, it was the intention of the Irish Government to accede as soon as possible to the European Convention on the Suppression of Terrorism. As you know there was a constitutional problem about acceding to this Convention, but in the light of recent judgements by our Courts in extradition cases, the Government is advised that this problem has been overcome and that preparation for our accession may proceed. We are giving priority to this matter but I might say that this Convention does not simply concern our extradition arrangements with Britain. It concerns our arrangements with our other European neighbours also. The legislation required will therefore take some time to prepare. This is perfectly normal and should not be misunderstood - as it has perhaps been deliberately misunderstood by some - as a weakening of our commitment to accede to the Convention. There is no weakening. We stand by the commitment and will implement it just as we will other commitments made at Hillsborough. I am glad to have this opportunity to say so.

In concluding, I would like to refer to what the President of the Methodist Church in Ireland, Rev. Hamilton Skillen, said a few days ago at the funeral of the murdered RUC man, Derek Breen when he spoke of the other man, John McCabe, from the southern side of the border, murdered in the same attack. "Suffering of this nature is not confined to one community. It affects the whole of Ireland and particularly affects us in Ulster and those of us in grief for our own must never forget that there are people in other communities, in other churches and their tears are just as hot and scalding and their fears just as real as ours".

All of us who abhor violence, all of us who care for our fellow men and women, all of us who respect each others' identity, we are all together in this, and together we will win out. I believe the implementation of the Anglo-Irish Agreement - in all its aspects - will greatly help to bring that victory.