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## **Reflections on Democracy**

**Address by the Taoiseach,  
Mr. Charles J. Haughey, T.D.,  
Prime Minister of Ireland,  
at the Kennedy School of Government,  
Harvard University,  
on Friday, 22nd April, 1988**



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An Taoiseach,  
Charles J. Haughey T.D.  
President of Fianna Fáil.



This is the second occasion on which I have had the pleasure of speaking in this great seat of learning. I was last here in 1972 and at that time I was surprised, as I suppose many others have been, to discover how old Harvard is and at what an early stage in the history of America it was decided to found a University here.

The famous Irish philosopher and pioneer of American education, George Berkeley, was one of the earliest benefactors of the Harvard Library, and in his celebrated verses 'On the prospect of planting arts and learning in America' confidently predicted "Time's noblest offspring is the last".

Harvard today is one of the great egalitarian educational institutions of the world to which access is earned through academic excellence.

When I came here before, it was to reflect on the arts and on what should be the policy of a modern democracy towards the arts.

Today I would like to reflect on democracy itself with special reference to some of the issues and problems facing my own country at the moment; and I would like to illuminate my observations by a few reflections on the history of democracy in America. If in speaking about that history I appear to trespass, I can only plead that it is of interest to us all and that it would be foolish for any citizen of our modern world not to attempt to learn as much as he or she could from the American experience.

How deeply the world is indebted to American ideas of democracy is well known, but it may be worth reflecting on the fact that the very words "ballot", "devolution", and "proportional representation",

familiar to every schoolchild in Ireland, are of American origin. In any case Harvard is a place which tempts one to reflect on the history of democracy in America as well as its progress in the world generally, for this great University both mirrored and influenced that history and the names of Emerson, the great prophet of democratic self-reliance, and Thoreau, who posed fundamental questions about government, will always be associated with it.

American history can be seen largely as a struggle to attain three great objectives, liberty, democratic equality and political cohesion. The first thing to be said about these three noble objectives is that they were not attained more easily in America than anywhere else. They had to be struggled for right from the very beginning, against obstacles that seemed much larger to those who engaged in the struggle than they do to us in retrospect. "There is" said the second President of the Republic, John Adams, "an overweening fondness for representing this country as a scene of liberty, equality, fraternity, union, harmony and benevolence. But let not your sons and mine deceive themselves. This country, like all others, has been a theatre of parties and feuds for near 200 years."

Because of the tendency of time to simplify issues we look back on the founding fathers of the Republic as people who were engaged in a noble struggle for certain high ideals. But as C.A. Beard reminds us, the members of the Convention were soon "weary of talk about the rights of the people". They "were not seeking to realise any fine notions about democracy and equality but were concerned much more urgently in a desperate effort to establish a Government which would be strong enough to pay the national debt, regulate inter-State and foreign commerce, provide for national defence, prevent



fluctuations in the currency created by paper emissions and control the propensities of legislative majorities to attack private rights.”

That understanding by the Convention members of the realities of the world around them and in the light of which they had to formulate their decisions could, with benefit, be transmitted to many similar bodies today.

The ideals of liberty, democratic equality and political cohesion were not and are not to be attained without the overcoming of many obstacles, not least those inherent in human nature itself. More than that, in the history of the United States as in that of other countries, these ideals often seem to be in conflict not only with individual or regional or sectional interests, but even one with another.

In the history of the United States the rights of individual states seemed from the very beginning to have been in conflict with the larger interests of the Federal Union. Several times in its history the Union was on the point of dissolution or on the point of being torn apart by the assertion of these rights. Three weeks before the Declaration of Independence, the legislature of Virginia adopted a Bill of Rights which said that “The people have a right to a uniform Government; and, therefore, no Government separate from, or independent of, the Government of Virginia, ought to be erected or established within the limits thereof.”

Within the States themselves there were those who looked to an extension or strengthening of Federal power to further individual liberty or democratic equality. But there have likewise been those to whom the rights of the States themselves were the first guarantee of



both. It probably is true to say that throughout the entire history of the United States every step taken to defend or increase one of the three great objectives has seemed to somebody or other to be an encroachment on or a weakening of the other two and often with a great deal of justification.

Other countries too must face these apparent contradictions and seek sometimes unwelcome compromises. Ireland as a nation is older than the United States but as a democracy on the modern model it is younger and has learned a good deal from you. The sense of nationhood goes very far back in Ireland, much further back than modern ideas of politics. Irish poets and men of learning down to the 17th century and beyond took the whole island as their domain. True, Ireland lacked a centralised Government of the modern kind. But it had a sense of unity, a unity of language and of culture, the essence of nationhood. That unity was fractured firstly by invasion and the divisions of language, culture and religion that colonisation brought, and later in our time by partition.

In re-establishing that unity as I believe we must, we face something of the same problems that the United States faced in maintaining the union since it was first established over two hundred years ago. From the moment when the Convention met at Philadelphia compromise was essential as well as the acquiescence in the decisions of the majority which Thomas Jefferson postulated in his first inaugural address as "the vital principle of republics". At the time there was much debate about democratic tyranny. Many contemporaries were inclined to believe that to submit oneself to the will of the majority rather than to that of the king was to swap one tyranny for another. And yet democracy triumphed.



The principal political or constitutional problem that all the people on the island of Ireland face today is how to bring about unity or political cohesion while satisfying the minority on the island of Ireland that it would not involve the loss of that part of their tradition which they must dearly cherish and that democratic rule for the whole island could enhance their status and guarantee their rights and their security. Partition was imposed for the benefit of those who distrusted majority rule. Its imposition by an outside power in the Government of Ireland Act of 1920 can be seen as a violation of democracy, a negation of the right of the Irish people to self-determination, since up to that point Ireland had been agreed by everybody to be one political unit.

The challenge that we face over Northern Ireland is to create a solution that will restore political cohesion through the exercise of self-determination by the Irish people. This will not be created overnight and though there are analogies with the problems other countries have faced there are no instant formulae that can be summoned to our assistance. Violence must first cease as it can have no place in the building of the Ireland of the future that we desire. There will have to be a deliberate and careful assembling of the elements of a solution, a cautious and prudent assessment of how the various elements might interlock with each other, and a conscious cultivation of a sense of shared identity and collective purpose among the various parties in search of a solution.

In my view many of these elements were contained in the Report of the New Ireland Forum, which represents the agreed position of all the democratic Nationalist parties North and South. The Forum envisaged new constitutional arrangements which would accommodate



the differing traditions in Ireland in a unity which had been achieved by consent. That is the outcome that this Government are committed to work for.

To achieve lasting peace and stability in Northern Ireland as well as reconciliation requires that the substance of the issues at stake be addressed. Temporary, ad hoc solutions, crisis management or horrified response or reaction to the latest atrocity are not enough. Political developments in recent years have been influenced mainly by the Anglo-Irish process initiated at a meeting between the British Prime Minister and myself at Dublin Castle in December 1980. It is clearly the responsibility of the two Governments involved, the Irish and British, to create a framework within which progress and political dialogue can take place.

The problem involves what was called in the communiqué issued after that meeting the totality of the relationships between the two islands. There followed the Anglo-Irish Agreement of November 1985, about which my party had reservations because of its constitutional implications. On coming into office my Government accepted it as an internationally binding agreement signed between two sovereign Governments and we set about using to the full the mechanisms of the agreement, particularly the Intergovernmental Conference and the Secretariat, to bring about any improvement that was possible in the situation of the people of Northern Ireland, and in particular the nationalist people.

The Intergovernmental Conference offers scope to confront a long agenda of issues; issues that are both difficult and divisive. But let me isolate those issues which I believe have a particular resonance



here in the United States, because of American experience and sensitivities. These are: the administration of justice, the upholding of the rule of law, and fair employment.

In the United States the debates that surround judicial nominations, particularly nominations to the Supreme Court, are of great length and seriousness, because of the conviction that prevails in this Republic that the lives of citizens in a democracy are shaped in an important and fundamental way by the manner in which justice is administered. This perception is widely shared in Ireland and attention is focussed intensely on the administration of justice in Northern Ireland. The defects in the administration of justice are seen as symptomatic of an inadequate society, and the operation of the non-jury Diplock Courts, for example, have an effect well beyond the ranks of those who are ever likely to appear before such Courts.

Democratic parliaments today have cause to be concerned about the control and methods of operation of their own and other countries intelligence services and security forces. They see increasingly the need for democratic supervision and the need for Governments to uphold without fear or favour the rule of law. It cannot be acceptable that perversion of the course of justice by officers of the state should be publicly acknowledged and then left at that. While the United States is justly proud of its free institutions, it has not allowed that pride to stand in the way of investigating and dealing with any infringements of the law or the Constitution. On the contrary, the strength of American democracy lies in the lengths to which its representatives are prepared to go to uphold the rule of law and the belief that a democratic state must never in combatting its enemies depart from the high ground of moral rectitude.



Of basic importance too where modern concepts of democracy are concerned is the equal access to employment by all sections of the community. Experience of civil rights in the United States in the '60s brought the fair employment issue here to the centre of national concern. During the administrations of John Fitzgerald Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, vigorous methods were devised to combat racial prejudice in employment. The methods devised here in the U.S. might not always be the best adapted to suit the somewhat different circumstances of Northern Ireland but, nevertheless, the heightened consciousness of employment equality issues which resulted from the trauma of the 1960s in the U.S. must also be brought to bear in Northern Ireland and a sense of real urgency created.

The nationalist community in Northern Ireland has been discriminated against in employment for too long. It is intolerable that nationalists still remain over twice as likely to be unemployed as unionists. Improvements are contemplated but there is an urgent need for comprehensive and effective legislation that will have clear and visible results.

Though the long shadow of the tragedy of Northern Ireland does fall over too many aspects of life in Ireland and affects the quality of Anglo-Irish relations, it must be understood that in the Republic of Ireland by contrast democracy has long grown to full maturity. Ireland as a modern parliamentary democracy plays a modest but honourable role in international affairs as an enlightened member of the community of nations.



From one global perspective the Irish are a small family, deeply concerned with their internal problems, political and economic. But we are also very conscious of the fact that there is a far wider dimension to the Irish in the modern world.

We are not in fact an insular family but one which extends around the world. The totality of the Irish nation reaches out far beyond the island of Ireland, beyond the boundaries of Europe and around the globe. There are major communities of Irish people on every continent. These communities are of great importance and significance in the life of their countries of adoption but they also represent potentially a powerful world-wide public voice for peace, justice and democratic government.

The Prime Minister of Australia, Bob Hawke, when he addressed the Irish Parliament last year, referring to those who had previously done so, said:

“The choice of two Americans and one Australian reflects the historical truth of this most anti-imperialist of nations — that Ireland is the head of a huge empire in which Australia and the United States are the principal provinces.

It is an empire acquired not by force of Irish arms but by force of Irish character, an empire not of political coercion but of spiritual affiliation, created by the thousands upon thousands of Irish men and women who chose to leave these shores, or who were banished from them, to help in the building of new societies over the years.”



The Irish Government has a responsibility to foster and promote Ireland's links with these communities and keep them fully informed of our political hopes and aspirations and our economic and social progress. We also have a responsibility to ensure that the Irish everywhere stand up for democratic Government wherever it may be threatened. By an enlightened and courageous stand on human rights, freedom, world hunger, the role of the UN, the nuclear menace and disarmament we can offer the Irish around the world moral leadership and encourage them to exert a powerful world-wide influence for the good in international affairs.

Ireland is one of the few nations of the European Community which has suffered colonisation and because of our history in that regard we are in a privileged position in regard to most of the small and emerging nations of the modern world. Our work in the mission fields and in health and welfare projects makes us keenly aware of the plight of smaller Third World nations with whom we have the privilege of special relationships. We stand, respected, in the middle ground between the affluent North and the underdeveloped South, ideally suited to play a valuable bridging role.

Because of our folk memory of the Great Famine which devastated the Irish people in 1845, the presence or the fear of famine and malnutrition strikes a deep chord amongst the Irish people. They have responded with overwhelming generosity to recent crises in Africa and elsewhere.

The promotion of respect for human rights is an important strand in Irish foreign policy. Historical experience and the humanitarian instincts of our people combine to ensure a real concern on the part



of public opinion in Ireland for the rights of those whose essential freedoms are denied. Torture, disappearances, summary executions, denial of freedom of speech and association, obstacles to the free practice of religion — these are but some of the violations which are an everyday tragic reality for people in many regions of the world.

Ireland has always insisted that the international community has a right, and indeed an obligation, to concern itself with human rights violations wherever they occur. We have never accepted the argument that involvement in these matters can be construed as interference in the internal affairs of states; the fallacy of that argument is thankfully increasingly understood. Such concern can be expressed in a way that fully respects the legitimate rights of self-determination.

A particularly glaring example of the denial of human rights is the system of apartheid which is an institutionalised and brutally enforced system of racial discrimination. Ireland has long supported the total abolition of the apartheid system and the emergence in its place of a democratic and multi-racial society as far as possible by peaceful means.

Ireland has played a small but useful part in efforts throughout the democratic world to advance these objectives. At a national level the importation of agricultural produce from South Africa into Ireland has been prohibited since the beginning of 1987. In accordance with its support for the principle of non-discrimination in sport, the Irish Government seeks to prevent sporting fixtures involving Ireland and South Africa. We have no diplomatic relations with South Africa and minimal official contacts. State agencies are strongly



discouraged from purchasing South African goods. Within the European Community we continue to seek consensus on further measures, such as a ban on the import of coal, while at the UN Ireland continues to support the imposition of selective mandatory sanctions.

A firm approach by democratic countries, particularly with the support of the United States, has succeeded in the last number of years in bringing many tyrannies to an end. Consistent support for humane and civilised values in other parts of the world should not conflict with enlightened self-interest.

As a maritime nation and an agricultural producer Ireland has a keen interest in an international approach to the protection of the environment. Experts from many disciplines are convinced that we are in the middle of a global ecological crisis and that our planet is now at a critical point in its evolution. There is the danger from nuclear emissions and accidents and the dumping of nuclear waste. Carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is increasing steadily and the warming of the atmosphere as a result has far-reaching implications. By the end of this century at least one-third of the earth's tropical forests which have a great influence on our climate and environment will have been destroyed. By the same date the total area of the world's desert will be increased by two-thirds. Marine resources are being seriously damaged and acid rain destroys lakes, rivers and forests.

Perhaps most serious of all is the destruction of the diversity of the earth's species. We are losing a species a day and some scientists put it even higher than that. Species are being destroyed before we



even have time to research what benefits they might have for us. Professor O'Wilson of this University has called it "the terrible catastrophe, the loss of genetic and species diversity by the destruction of habitats."

In my view there is an urgent need for a new and enlightened international approach to the management of this planet that will take account of the interdependence and linkage between all living things.

An excellent document "The World Conservation Strategy" was published in 1980 and endorsed by FAO and UNESCO. There are a number of Treaties and Conventions in place such as the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species to help in the work of preserving the diversity of species. It is also true that we have in fact the scientific capacity to reverse the process of destruction and renew the planet's resources. What is needed is enlightened international action by all the nations, but especially the powerful dominant countries, and by all the appropriate international agencies.

While statesmen generally have been concerned with the threat to the survival of mankind posed by the proliferation of nuclear weapons, the general public in Ireland and I believe in many other countries have recently begun to focus just as anxiously on civilian nuclear power and the real danger of nuclear accidents and the dumping of nuclear waste.

The grim reality of our modern world is that serious nuclear accidents do occur with effects which are in our human time-scale



everlasting and range far beyond political boundaries. A serious accident at Windscale in 1957 on the north-west coast of Britain is suspected by expert medical opinion of being responsible for birth defects in children born many years later on parts of the east coast of Ireland.

The Three Mile Island accident in 1979 made responsible people everywhere think again about the wisdom of building more and more plants.

The Chernobyl nuclear accident in 1986, which forced the permanent evacuation of the immediate surrounding area, occurred a thousand miles from Ireland but posed threats to our health and welfare.

It was sadly ironic that after Chernobyl children all over Europe were admonished by their parents not to do all those things that generations of children had formerly been advised to do for their health; get out in the fresh air, drink milk, eat fresh vegetables, swim in the sea. Is this the sort of future that mankind must look forward to?

It is clear that nuclear dangers cannot be regarded in isolation or that the safety of installations is only of concern to the nation involved. The effects of radioactivity released into the natural environment will inevitably cross national boundaries.

In Ireland while we are nuclear free and intend to stay that way we live in the shadow of nuclear installations, some fifty or sixty miles away across the Irish sea. The Irish Parliament by a unanimous



resolution has called for the closure of some of these installations which have a poor safety record and constitute a serious threat to the health and livelihood of our people. We oppose also the practice of dumping nuclear waste at sea, which is contrary to the best international practice and which the United States Administration in the past has expressed opposition to as being unsound. We are entitled to express our fears and anxieties but there is no way in which we can take the matter further.

While I believe that the wisest and safest thing to do is to phase out nuclear power altogether, the least the people of the world are entitled to at this stage is that it be subjected to the most stringent impartial international inspection and controls that respect the legitimate interests and rights of neighbouring jurisdictions.

I believe these concerns about the transnational effects of domestic nuclear activity are widely shared by many countries but there is no forum or tribunal to which we can have recourse. There is in my view an unanswerable case for an international body to police this dangerous sector and to act as a court of appeal, to which nations who feel that the safety and welfare of their people is endangered by the activity of their neighbours can go to seek remedial action.

The frightening growth within one generation of huge nuclear weapons arsenals, with the capacity to destroy mankind, has been a source of the greatest concern to every country.

The primary responsibility to disarm lies with the major military powers. The world must warmly welcome the agreement to eliminate intermediate-range nuclear weapons and the positive

developments which have taken place in the US-Soviet relationship. This welcome is for both what has been achieved and for the possibility for further progress that it opens up. We hope that there can be substantial progress at the forthcoming Moscow US-Soviet meeting towards greater reductions in nuclear arsenals. The ultimate goal must remain the complete elimination of all nuclear weapons, and the early completion of a comprehensive nuclear test ban treaty would constitute another step in this direction. We also need more rapid progress towards the prohibition of chemical weapons and the reduction of conventional forces and armaments.

For good historical and political reasons Ireland maintains a steadfast policy of military neutrality in the modern world. It is a policy which is very widely supported by the people of Ireland. It has not always perhaps been fully understood here, but I should point out that during the course of its history the United States too has maintained for long periods an honourable tradition of neutrality.

I must emphasise that our neutrality is positive and outward-looking. It does not involve a passive role in world affairs; exactly the opposite. It involves a commitment, for example, to United Nations peacekeeping operations, a role which we have honourably and effectively discharged on many occasions; it involves disinterested action in international fora based on a fair and equitable evaluation of international political issues and human problems which is informed by humane values and our commitment to democratic principles.

There is a sense in which all democracies are one. As Professor Carl Becker has pointed out, "in the Declaration of Independence the



foundation of the United States is indissolubly associated with a theory of politics, a philosophy of human rights, which is valid, if at all, not for Americans only, but for all men." Democracy thus described is an ideal to which all men and women everywhere aspire. It was a great Irishman, Dean Swift, who first said that "all Government without the consent of the governed is the very definition of slavery". This underlines the historical fact that if the peoples of the old world had not carried their democratic yearnings with them into the new there might well be no American democracy today. This School of Government is named after a great man of Irish descent who was also a great democrat. In his inaugural address John Fitzgerald Kennedy spoke not only to his fellow Americans, but, as he put it, to his "fellow citizens of the world" and he urged them to ask themselves "what together we can do for the freedom of man". The democratic goal and the right of people everywhere to self-determination is thus seen as something which must be of universal and permanent concern to Americans.

The history of our two countries suggest that their achievement in Ireland should have a very high priority for America today.