



An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

Reference Code: 2021/98/19

Creator(s): Department of the Taoiseach

Accession Conditions: Open

Copyright: National Archives, Ireland. May only be reproduced with the written permission of the Director of the National Archives.

25 + 27



STATEMENT BY MR. BERTIE AHERN T.D., LEADER OF FIANNA FÁIL
ON THE SITUATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND, DÁIL EIREANN,
THURSDAY, 10 OCTOBER 1996 AT 11.30 AM APPROXIMATELY.

All of us are deeply appalled by, and unreservedly condemn the IRA bomb attack on a British army base in Lisburn. It has left many people wounded, and what remained of the peace process in complete tatters. Some of us were well aware that time was running out fast, and warned people to that effect.

The bomb attack in Britain last February, which ended the IRA ceasefire, was deeply irresponsible. We all felt betrayed. It certainly contributed to the deteriorating atmosphere this summer, even if it was not the sole cause of it. But it is hard for me to find words sufficient to express my dismay and revulsion at the premeditated and deeply provocative IRA decision, to renew their campaign of violence in Northern Ireland after more than 2 years. It is an act of such criminal stupidity, and with the potential for such evil consequences, that it is difficult to believe that any rational organisation could decide to do it, let alone one calling itself Irish and Republican.

The bomb attack is a deeply unpatriotic act. It is the people on this island, Unionist and Nationalist, who will be most affected. All of us would be critical of the way in which the peace process has been allowed to be

squandered. But why should the people of Northern Ireland, the people of Ireland who have so badly wanted peace, be made to suffer ?

The IRA bomb attack is directed at the lives, security and prosperity of the people of Ireland, North and South. It sabotages the progress that could be made through a peaceful political process, notwithstanding the current difficulties and setbacks. It will hold back the entire country, if the violence continues and escalates. It runs a high risk of provoking a chain reaction.

What I find hardest to understand is the political defeatism, cowardice and the political illusions of the IRA. They have skilled political leaders. Why do they refuse to trust them ? Twenty-five years of violence was marked by complete futility, in which nothing was achieved in terms of any worthwhile advance towards a united Ireland. Whatever realistic hopes there might have been of achieving a united Ireland by agreement, over time, have been largely destroyed by the IRA. Northern Ireland is divided as never before. We, the Irish people of this Republic, do not want an unstable united Ireland built on the peace of the cemetery, and on the ashes of sectarian bitterness and hatred.

I would like to think that the IRA, however misguided, were motivated by genuine Republican ideals. But I see no evidence of any understanding of genuine Republicanism among them, that could be a foundation of peace and ultimate unity in the 21st century. Republicans know, because they have said it, that Unionists cannot be coerced into a united Ireland against their will. They know, because they have said it, that they do not have sufficient force or the necessary support to push the British Army and

Government out of this country. They know that no agreement will work without Unionist participation, because they have said it. So why then do the IRA persist in tactics that they know will lead nowhere, except to more death, destruction and disaster? The ideals of the United Irishmen, the leaders of 1848, and of the leaders of 1916 have *nothing* in common with the actions being carried out today. Where are the ideals that inspired a nation?

I would like to believe that the leadership of Sinn Féin recognise in their heart of hearts, the truth and force of what I am saying today. Despite the impressive mandate for peace, which they won in June, and which should have been used to participate in talks, they have not been able to persuade others within their movement. However discouraging events have been, they are the only people who can persuade the IRA to stop their campaign. Sinn Féin, if it is to have a long-term future, must redouble their efforts to win the battle of minds in which the victory is a commitment to democratic methods alone. The IRA's decision of Autumn 1994 was the absolutely correct one. Their decision to return to violence was an absolutely wrong one. If the argument for peace was won in 1994 by the wisdom and logic of John Hume, Gerry Adams and Albert Reynolds, then that same argument for peace can be won again. But those arguing for the democratic option must have the constant support of both Governments, without equivocation.

The immediate concern of everyone is the impact that the bomb attacks may have on the Loyalist ceasefire. I recognise the historic contribution that their ceasefire has made and can continue to make. The Loyalist parties have won the respect of many people in the South by their forthright and

courageous stand, with relatively little immediate political reward. I would urge them to stick to their principled position, including their adherence to the Mitchell Principles. Their political cause has nothing to gain from a Loyalist return to violence, and that is the view of their own political and community leaders, not just mine.

Cardinal Daly in a public address in France yesterday expressed the view that none of the parties involved, neither the British Government, the Unionists nor Sinn Féin, will ever enjoy a better opportunity for peace, than the one they have thrown away. I agree with that. All of us are dismayed at the speed with which the peace process has been allowed to unravel. While the breaches of the ceasefire are entirely the responsibility of the IRA, the breakdown of the peace process and its inability to make progress is largely the fault of others. What I said in February, I repeat now, all of us to a greater or lesser degree share in some of the blame. Collectively, we have allowed the best opportunity for peace in 25 years to escape us.

The British Government will not be thanked by history for the way it frustrated the peace process, after it was gifted, mainly through the effort of others, an unexpected ceasefire. It was the British insistence on prior disarmament, in order to satisfy right-wingers and preserve a parliamentary majority, that quite literally wrecked hopes of political progress. The peace process and the ceasefires were based on the premise that there had been no military victory and no military defeat on any side. How can you insist on a surrender of arms, when there has been no military victory? But the British Tories had to pretend they had won, and therefore insisted on what they knew the IRA would never concede. It is a scandal

and indictment of the political incompetence of the British Government, that they could not organise inclusive peace talks even after 16 or 17 months ceasefire. Apart from excluding Sinn Féin, the British treatment of paramilitary prisoners, who had played a key role in opting for peace, sent all the wrong signals. Surely the very least that those prisoners could have hoped for, having clearly turned their back on violence, was that their situation would not be worsened. But in many cases, the plight of the prisoners was made much worse. Such treatment made no sense whatever.

As far as the Irish side are concerned, the greatest tragedy was the change in Government. Despite their best efforts, and I acknowledge that there has been a great deal of sincere hard work, the present Government have not succeeded in retaining the confidence of the Republican movement, or even the same level of confidence in the wider Nationalist community. Neither have they won the confidence of the Unionist and Loyalist community. I believe that on many occasions they were not tough enough in public with the British Government, each time they sought to move the goalposts. I will say no more on the subject, as we have a patriotic duty to pull together in times of crisis, and to try and make progress with as much political unity in this House as possible.

The Unionist parties also have to answer for their clear responsibility in the breakdown of the peace process. Neither in the talks, where the SDLP is present, nor even in the Forum, where no Nationalist parties at all are present, have the Unionist parties shown the slightest interest in reaching an accommodation or political settlement that would underpin the peace.

The tactics of the parties led by Dr. Paisley and Mr. Robert McCartney have been wrecking ones, without the slightest concern or interest in peace. The Ulster Unionist Party has not felt itself strong enough to confront such tactics. The entire Unionist effort has therefore gone into obstructionism and making it as difficult as possible for Sinn Féin to ever join the talks. The decommissioning issue has been used quite cynically over the last 18 months, to control every aspect of the talks.

I leave it for the people of Northern Ireland themselves to judge which parties have made a genuine effort to consolidate peace, and which parties have undermined it.

It has often been said that Governments should not be influenced by the politics of the latest atrocity. What was right a month ago is still right today. The terms on which Sinn Féin can take part in talks should not be made more difficult as a result of what has happened.

My view of what is needed to re-establish peace has not altered, and consists basically of six points :

1. The IRA must restore their ceasefire. If the August 1994 ceasefire is restored, with adequate assurances that it is complete and definitive, and that there will be no further going back on it, Sinn Féin should then be allowed to take their place at the table, on the basis of the Mitchell Principles without delay.
2. In accordance with paragraph 4 of the Downing Street Declaration, the two Governments should establish a time-frame

for talks and define the length of the period in which agreement should be reached.

3. It should be accepted, as we have argued all along, that decommissioning should be a part of the talks process, and not something on which prior agreement and movement are required.
4. A liberal régime for the release of politically-motivated prisoners, Loyalist and Republican, should be established, once there is a clear commitment to a permanent peace.
5. Actions should be taken by the British Government, independent of the talks process, to enhance equality and parity of esteem, to build confidence and economic and social progress.
6. Multilateral talks often prove sterile. There is a case for conducting bilaterals well out of the public view, as was done originally in the Middle-East process. There may also be a case for moving the talks to a neutral location outside these islands. It has been suggested in the corridors of Congress that President Clinton, before or after the Election, should invite the parties and the Governments to Washington, to provide an impetus for progress.

On this side of the House we want to give the highest possible credit to Senator George Mitchell who used all his negotiating skills to facilitate the Parties to the Northern Talks in making some progress. We are deeply indebted to him. It is a pity in our view that the participants in the talks did not allow themselves to make more use of his skills to bring them into

substantive talks. It will be difficult for them to find another person of such stature who has the time and inclination to work so hard on their behalf with so little return for his work. I was unimpressed by the brevity of the meeting between the Taoiseach and the British Prime Minister last Saturday, and that fact that the Prime Minister absented himself from the dinner. I have often regretted that relations between the Taoiseach and the Prime Minister do not seem to be of the same quality as the very productive relationship which John Major and Albert Reynolds had between 1992 and 1994. It seems to me imperative that the two Heads of Government should get together, and agree to give fresh impetus to the talks process. The logjams have to be cleared out of the way, and some of the parties in the North told that a more serious approach is expected of them.

Political leaders cannot afford to despair, but neither should they engage in foolish optimism, when it is not justified. We need to concentrate minds on the appalling prospects facing us, if we do not take every action within our power to halt the slide back into violence.

In the early months of this year I raised in this House the possible conflict between the Tánaiste's role as President of the European Council and his role in the Northern peace talks. I did not believe he could adequately do both. This last week, he had to cancel attendance at the Pittsburgh Conference and at the Northern talks, to go and establish a European presence at the Middle East peace talks. It is not a satisfactory situation, and it is not too late for the Taoiseach to re-allocate cabinet responsibilities, so that the highest priority is given both to Northern Ireland and the European Presidency.

My party will continue to do everything we can to contribute constructively to the restorations of peace. We need calm and responsible leadership combined with quick and decisive action. The IRA must be left with no excuse for continuing their campaign of violence. I hope that despite all appearances to the contrary, that it is not too late to salvage peace. All our futures depend on it.