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20th February, 1971Situation in Northern Ireland

Extract from An Taoiseach's Presidential Address to the Fianna  
Fail Ard-Fheis at the R.D.S., Ballsbridge, on Saturday,  
20th February, 1971

We have seen a year in which there has been much violence leading to loss of life in the North. This situation offers more potential for harm or harmony than any other aspect of Irish life. At times it has faded from the headlines only to return to fill the television screen. Peace in the North is precariously poised. At any moment it can be lost and prosperity, happiness, even life itself in both parts of this island can be seriously damaged. We can be damaged in other ways also. During the period of tension around the 13th July last the Press and television of the world turned its eyes on Belfast. There were during that period as many foreign correspondents in Belfast as there normally are in Saigon. In some cases they were the same men who covered the war in Vietnam. We can take no pleasure out of this. But beneath the turmoil and disturbance which unhappily continue, it would be wise also to notice the fundamental changes which are taking place.

While mistakes have been made, both political and tactical, especially in Belfast, the movement to legislative reform has also continued and we look to the full and speedy implementation of the Downing Street Declaration which guarantees equality of treatment to everyone in the North without regard to religious considerations. This is a fundamental issue and a fundamental change from the situation which existed up to August 1969. Impatience is certainly understandable on the part of the minority and it is easy to provoke a depressed community into physical violence; but it remains the task of political leadership both North and South to do all possible to calm the situation so that the benefits of reform can be achieved with the least possible delay.

As time passes it must become more and more evident to objective observers that the traditional Unionist policy of turning its back on its own place in Ireland - and, indeed, on its own history in Ireland - contains neither common sense nor prospects of a peaceful and prosperous future. It is also obvious that North and South are not two separate nations.

Policies based on such fallacies are wilfully blind; they were sustained in the North only by repression of the minority. The absurd lengths to which this logic of denial found itself forced resulted in the breakdown of society; it was the prime cause of the breakdown; and it continued to trap policy in the dismal round of provocation, reaction and further repression. To find a way forward we must begin with a recognition of the facts.

There is no use in pretending, as some do, that the incidence of discrimination in the North was fragmentary and rare and that, therefore, all that is required now is the elimination of minor irritations. I would go further and say that, even if it were recognised that discrimination was a conscious way of life, it is not now sufficient to eliminate discrimination via legislative reforms. Such reforms attack the obvious symptoms but do little to solve the underlying problems.

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Much more is needed. A community of half a million has been deprived of normal and reasonable participation in the affairs and wealth of the area for half a century; their cultural values have been ignored or denigrated. To reverse this - and redress the balance - requires a depth of attention to their views and needs, of which we would like to see much more evidence. When will it be understood that there will be no peace with justice in the North until Unionism has the courage to recognise that it represents only part of a community and that traditional Unionism itself divided the community by insisting on outmoded loyalties and conformities? Can we hope that enough has been seen of strife and death in the North to persuade the better instincts of the Northern majority into a realisation that an effort of will is required on their part to correct what is wholly wrong - their refusal to accommodate the political and cultural sensitivities of the Northern minority?

The basic issue remains what it always has been. No words of mind could express it better than Yeats did in his speech to the Seanad in 1925 when he said "it is perhaps the deepest political passion with this nation that the North and South be united into one nation".

For 50 years North and South have been divided one from the other; we are not complete, one without the other. During these decades we in the South have founded an independent State and, from beginnings which were immensely difficult socially and economically, we have increased our prosperity and happiness. We have done this by our own efforts. We have obtained a position of respect for our country throughout the world. If we now say to the North that their place is with us, in a nation formed by us all, we offer something in which we have pride and confidence and which all Irishmen are welcome to share.

Indeed there are many examples over the last couple of decades of cooperation between North and South in economic undertakings to the mutual benefit of both parts of the country. A recent example was the preferential tariff concessions that we unilaterally extended to a range of industrial goods from Northern Ireland firms. More recently when the Anglo-Irish Free Trade Agreement was negotiated, it provided, at our instigation, for more favourable tariff treatment for a range of North of Ireland industrial goods than for British goods.

Under the terms of the Agreement this preferential treatment comes up for review next June after five years of operation. The Government will be anxious to see how this can be continued. I know that these concessions create problems for some Twenty-six County industrialists but I know that they will continue to react as generously as they have done in recent years.

I want to repeat also our offer of cooperation in regional development. One example of what I have in mind is the creation of much-needed industrial employment for what is essentially a homogeneous community along border areas, without regard to creed or political affiliation and without regard to the border itself. I know there will be snags, legal and technical, for example, joint participation by Dublin and Stormont in making industrial grants available, reciprocity in employment insurance benefits and the existence of work permits and other employment restrictions. But I believe that with goodwill, such problems can be overcome.

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I would like to draw attention to one thing in which I believe we can be particularly helpful.

We are in direct contact with the European Economic Community in the course of negotiating our entry to the Community. We have developed a great amount of information and expertise on what membership of the Community will mean for the future of this country.

The problems the North will face in relation to membership of the European Community are much closer to ours over a wide field than they are to British problems. We would be very happy to make our knowledge available to the Stormont Administration and to enable the North to draw on our experience at any time and on any subject. There have already been occasions, because of the closer identity of some of the North's problems with ours than with Britain's, when informal exchanges have taken place between officials. We regard this as a welcome development and one which we will be glad to pursue.

I want to say that never have I acknowledged and never will I acknowledge that any section of our community who happened to be a majority in a part of our country has the right to opt out of our nation. The position on Article Three of the Constitution is the same now as it was when the Inter-Party Committee on the Constitution issued its report in 1967. All members of the Government then knew where they stood. The position was now as it had been then. No one need have any fear about changes in our claim to the national territory.

Is it not better that the Northern majority should participate in the further development of Ireland than that they should remain caught in a dilemma which is as tragic as it is unnecessary? The use of armies to maintain a State destroys the freedom of all the population in the long run. History is full of examples of this from the Roman Empire to the present day. To go down that road again, in order to maintain a myth or a selfish part-prosperity, would be an act of folly carrying incalculable consequences.

Far from saying any of this in rancour, my purpose is to say to the Northern majority that between us, with goodwill and the use of all the talents we have, we can break the chains of a long history of distrust and misunderstanding and refuse to be bound by the mistakes of the past. We share this country not merely because we live on the same island; we share it also because of common history, because of qualities which complement each other where they are not the same; because our blood has been intermingled as much as it has been uselessly shed; because we have, all of us, formed and cultivated the land of Ireland and none of us can be removed from what we made.

Out of our rich store of shared experience is it not better to find a means of bringing peace and happiness to Ireland than to continue the shameful exploitation of lesser passions, an exploitation designed to maintain a division within Ireland, and even within the North itself, at the expense of the character of the Northern majority as well as of the fair treatment of the Northern minority in their own land?

We on our part are prepared to seek, with our Northern brethren, a true meaning for Irish nationalism. It is, in our view, a wide and embracing concept - not the exclusive property of any single set of beliefs or attitudes. It is one which would attract and retain the respect and allegiance of all Irishmen.

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It is founded in the belief, expressed throughout our history, that we Irish are a distinct nation; that none of us, irrespective of ancient origin or later migration, remains uninfluenced by the environment of the land in which we live.

We are free to create our own united society. It is one which would have as a principle running through its Fundamental Law and its Statutes and its Regulations, the idea that the State shall protect religious liberties; that the State shall respect civil liberties, and that cultural diversity is a source of strength.

I said in Dáil Éireann on the 28th July last "insofar as there are constitutional difficulties which are legitimately seen by people to be infringements of their civil rights, then their views are worthy of intensive examination and we should try to accommodate them in our constitution and in our laws".

I repeat that now. The Constitution of a united Ireland requires to be a document in which no element of sectarianism, even unconscious or unintended, should occur.

There is a wrongful idea current in the North that the Republic is constantly plotting to destroy the North, that the South is solely interested in taking over the North for the sake of territorial aggrandisement and that the South is motivated in this by religious antagonism. Whenever such absurdities are likely to be forgotten there are people who, depending on these myths for their positions of power, prestige and privilege, come out from under the stones of history and stir up hatred.

It is true that there are some, a tiny percentage of our total population, who keep alive the physical force tradition. They do not represent anything significant in our community, yet this tiny minority, coupled with these ancient fears stirred up again and again by tales of a Catholic plot, are enough to give the North recurring crises.

Our laws are not framed to give offence to anyone. At the time that our Constitution was drafted it represented the deep, general and genuine religious outlook of the majority of Irish people. The same goes for our laws, which are administered equally and not with bigotry. It has often seemed to us in the South that many people who raised the question of our "Catholic legislation" as they termed it, did so, not as a matter of genuine principle, but as shibboleths to be used to confuse issues rather than engage in genuine dialogue.

But times have changed.

It was the great Protestant patriot Charles Stewart Parnell who said "No man may set a boundary to the march of a nation". Despite the terrible events of the last two years the South is moving, not towards combat and harshness, but towards a new and hopeful vision of peace and progress for everyone in all of Ireland. Where it can be shown that attitudes embodied in our laws and Constitution give offence to liberty of conscience then we are prepared to see what can be done to harmonise our views so that, without detracting from genuine values, a new kind of Irish society may be created equally agreeable to North and South. Then the whole nation, in extension of Parnell's statement, could begin to remove barriers to its progress and develop the ability and willingness to accommodate the best in its laws and practices and in its religious and cultural traditions.

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We wish to extend an olive branch to the North and we wish the North to accept it. If this means that we must grasp some nettles which might sting our pride then we will readily do so if the result be a just and lasting peace throughout our island.

We recognise that the slow, difficult, painful and even dangerous process of continually and unflinchingly holding out the hand of friendship to our fellow-country men in the North is an essential step towards the goal of an Ireland in which all of our people may live in peace, tolerance, respect, understanding and in unity. This result can only be postponed by every fresh act of aggression which sets Irishmen against Irishmen. We know that there are in the North more and better people than the ranting bigot, or the bullyboys with the bombs, with the tar and feathers. We know that there are moderate, decent, God-fearing, self-respecting Christians of all denominations trying to keep themselves and their families according to their beliefs and to live normal neighbourly lives irrespective not alone of the pressures arising from the disordered situation in Northern Ireland but also those of modern society. All these people want to live at peace with each other and we want to live at peace with them.

Before I leave this subject I would once again put it into a context which extends beyond this island. Our closest neighbour has been involved in our affairs for many centuries. There is no use, as I have said to Britain and the British people, in continuing a quarrel which time has made irrelevant to the greater good of either of us. The relationship between Ireland and Britain requires no formalisation. Indeed the attempts, for centuries, to bind the relationship into formulas which took no account of Irish nationhood, failed. Since the failure was admitted 50 years ago the relationship between Britain and the South has become all the stronger for being a mutually valuable one without overtones of conquest. The remnant of that conquest, which is an aspect of the division of Ireland, remains the only but dangerous disaffection in what has become otherwise a unique condition between independent countries.

We in Fianna Fáil have no doubt of this Party's objective of a united Ireland. The achievement of this objective is one to which we must put all the means at our disposal.

Wishful thinking and slogans which have brought only barren results are not enough. Young men who have been shot while trying to achieve unity by force have suffered futile death. The Border cannot be wished away, the Border cannot be shot away - but it can be removed by agreement between Irishmen, North and South.

The events in the North have had repercussions in this part of the country not least within our own party. They have given rise to issues on the roles and relationships between party, Government and leader. It is important that I should speak to you this evening on these issues so that you as spokesmen and leaders of our party and organisation should have the opportunity of considering them.

Fianna Fáil is a republican party. As such it advocates a democratic form of government for the nation and it applies the same democratic principles to the government of the party itself.

At Árd Fheiseanna, the party organisation, through its chosen representatives, lays down major principles, and outlines the policies and methods by which it seeks to attain its stated aims and objectives. It does not and cannot seek to legislate for every eventuality in such a forum. Instead it leaves the day-to-day direction and operation of the organisation to the National Executive and the officers who are elected annually for the purpose. The decisions and actions of the Executive can be brought under scrutiny at this annual Árd Fheis, where approval or disapproval may be recorded.

This defines a clear framework within which any individual or group who seek to influence policy must operate. If the matter is one of major importance involving substantial policy shifts then it is clear they must advocate their views to the organisation in general, and seek to persuade an Árd Fheis to make the relevant decisions. On other matters which fall within the ambit of the National Executive they must abide by the Executive's decisions unless and until an Árd Fheis rules otherwise.

It is important that throughout the organisation as a whole no member, whether through over-enthusiasm or otherwise, will overstep his remit. When difficulties arise, as they inevitably must in any human society, it is the task of the National Executive to take appropriate action.

As for the Parliamentary Party, the primary requirement is to ensure that agreed party policy is properly presented and advocated, and that all members in their speeches and actions remain within the acceptable boundaries of policy as laid down. Should any difficulties or disputes arise, it is my task as leader to ensure that any disciplinary or corrective measures are taken. He is not worthy to be a leader who avoids or evades whatever problems arise and fails to face up to decisions and actions however unpalatable.

The role of Party Leader takes on an added dimension when his party is given the task and honour of governing the country. Last year it was my duty, a sad duty, to take unpalatable action when I believed, after deep and balanced considerations, that the acceptable boundaries of policy to which I refer were breached.

It is fully recognised that membership of a political party calls for some restraint on individual freedom of action. It is unlikely, indeed impossible, that all members will hold identical views on every detail of policy, and the range of opinion will vary from subject to subject. Each member is free to advocate his or her views, but then must accept as party policy whatever the party decides. If the gap between the party viewpoint and their own thinking becomes too great then they are free to withdraw if they so desire. As true democrats we recognise and respect the right of every man to hold steadfastly to his views, and there is nothing dishonourable in being willing to accept a party decision which runs counter to one's personal views in some respects. In fact the contrary is the case - a willingness to sacrifice part of one's self for the greater good and for a common cause has, throughout history, been recognised as one of the noblest and most splendid of human endeavours.

Because politics deals with the ideas and ideals by which men live, and which they hold with deep and sometimes passionate conviction, men may be expected to advocate their views with vigour and enthusiasm. Again this is not wrong - the healthy thrust and counterthrust of dedicated and sincere protagonists

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create a climate in which all aspects of an issue are fully debated. Indeed the real danger to democracy comes from the reverse situation of apathy and lethargy where there is silent acquiescence in decisions to which only superficial examination is given.

It is clear then that there is no objection to any individual or group advocating policy developments or changes. It is also clear that there are limits, freely accepted and understood, to the methods and extent of legitimate advocacy for such changes. Such limits are the necessary safeguards to avoid the tyranny whereby any group can impose its views on the majority. Hence, no matter how sincerely held a conviction or viewpoint may be, no person nor group has the right to portray his or their views as being those of the party.

In some cases individuals may not realise that this is what they are doing. Because we are so close in time to the profound political changes which won for us our independence, and because there are still unresolved political issues in our country, much of the discussion is couched in terms of the Republican ideals enunciated by the patriots and leaders of the past. But history is itself a deaf witness, a blind onlooker and a silent spectator. It is the living who recreate the past and the voices which they hear echoing thoughts and ideals across the pages of history are their own.

In saying this I want at the same time fully to recognise our great debt to the past and its immeasurable contribution to the present. The way to do this is not to make the ideas and vision of our forefathers a mould in which to entomb the minds and actions of the living. Each generation must enrich and revitalise the tradition which it inherits, just as those whose names we so rightly revere brought new light and vision to their own times.

In our party the dominant political objective is the reunification of our country. Since its foundation, Fianna Fáil policy has been and is, to seek this objective by peaceful means. There has been no basic dispute nor questioning that this should be our attitude in any positive approach or initiatives towards the North.

In elaborating on our basic policy of peaceful means for promoting reunification during past months I believe that I have been reflecting the thinking of Fianna Fáil, and because our party is the largest and most representative one, currently forming the Government party, I believe it also reflects the views of the vast majority of our people. If I am right in this then let it be made clear now since it is important that I as leader should know what the views of the party are.

It is not important that I personally as leader should be endorsed nor that my actions or statements be vindicated. The leader, any leader, as an individual is expendable. But the status of the leadership of our party is not, and we must ensure that it is not assailed nor undermined. We owe this not only to past leadership but more importantly to future leadership and to ourselves. What is important is that the fundamental principles of Fianna Fáil endorsed at successive Árd Fheiseanna and which bring us all together as members of this great party should not be distorted nor deviated from by any of its members or constituents.

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No man nor woman is the repository of all that Fianna Fáil stands for. Fianna Fáil policy is the sum of what every member contributes and subscribes to - not what any one person interprets it to be. No man nor woman in this organisation is entitled to claim for himself or herself a superior brand of Republicanism than any other member.

When it is alleged that it is necessary to put the rank and file of Fianna Fáil on guard against a drift from Republicanism which could take place behind their backs, I say, clearly and unequivocally, as far as the leadership of Fianna Fáil is concerned, that such a draft exists nowhere except in the imagination of those who make the charge.

The Republican principles and Republican traditions to which Fianna Fáil dedicated itself almost forty-five years ago and in its adherence to which Fianna Fáil has never wavered and never will, are in the safe-keeping of all our party. There is no need for anybody to set himself up as the sole "keeper of the flame".

I have had the honour to lead the Fianna Fáil Party and Government over the past four years. I am not afraid to render an account of my stewardship over that period to any man and I totally reject any allegation - no matter where it comes from, be it from within or without - that I have ever by word or by deed reneged on the trust reposed in me by this Party or by the people as a whole in the last general election.

Either as a party or as a Government, Fianna Fáil has no reason to face the testing years immediately ahead with anything other than with firm confidence. As a party we have demonstrated that we can successfully overcome the stresses and strains, the hardship and the heartbreak imposed by internal difficulties, that we can refuse to be panicked or blown off course by such events, and that we can emerge from the process of internal questioning and soul-searching with renewed energies and even greater sense of purpose. As a Government we have shown our capacity to govern courageously, wisely and well, commanding the solid and consistent support of the Irish people whose aims and aspirations Fianna Fáil, from the beginning, has made its own. The measure of progress achieved has been greater than even those who founded Fianna Fáil could have thought possible forty-five years ago. When these illustrious predecessors of ours entrusted the future of this great national movement to us they did so in the firm belief that we would prove worthy of their trust - a trust to build not to destroy. To bring their aims and aspirations to full fruition, that is our task.