

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

IRELAND



Reference Code:	2006/133/671
Creation Date(s):	1 October 1976
Extent and medium:	7 pages
Creator(s):	Department of the Taoiseach
Access Conditions:	Open
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Speech delivered by the Minister for Foreign Affairs
Dr. Garret FitzGerald T. D. at the Biltmore Hotel,
New York on Wednesday 1 October, 1975

Embargoed for release until 1 a. m. on 2nd October, 1975

Over these past two centuries, the interrelationship between the Irish in America and the Irish at home has been complex and close, and Ireland could not have evolved into independence in the way it did without the disinterested help and support of the Irish American Community. We in Ireland are conscious of - and grateful for - the way in which this interest and support has been maintained even half a century after the achievement of Irish independence.

However, the extreme complexity of the Northern Ireland problem which even those directly involved in it have found so difficult to grapple with, has in recent years created some problems of mutual understanding between the Irish at home and the Irish abroad which it must be the particular concern of an Irish Foreign Minister to bridge. That is why I am here today.

You in the United States must be conscious not merely of the enormous debt which this country owes to Ireland, through the millions of Irish people who have come here and helped to build this country, but also of the way in which Ireland's development during the past two centuries has in turn been influenced by the United States through the close links throughout this period between the Irish community here and the Irish at home. The American revolution and the construction of the United States in the 19th century provided inspiration for the

Irish people under foreign rule. The United States became a symbol of the free society to which Irish people aspired.

When the Irish state was founded, the influence of America was evident in aspects of its Constitution and in the kind of society which it tried to create. Thus, although in the partitioned Irish State 94 percent of the population were Catholics, almost all of them practising Catholics, the Constitution of the new State was founded on the principle of separation of Church and State and non-discrimination in religious matters - contrary to the historical European tradition. Moreover the Constitution also made provision for the protection of civil liberties from both the executive and the legislature through the power of the Supreme Court, on the American model, which did not have European parallels.

You are entitled to ask why Ireland, despite the lessons learnt from the United States experience, has not succeeded in creating a united democratic Republic based on religious tolerance. Americans must find it hard to understand why sectarianism has remained endemic in Northern Ireland and also why post-independence developments in the Republic tended to mark its institutions and laws more strongly with the influence of the Roman Catholic Church, while never, of course, discriminating in any way against the Protestant minority.

A large part of the answer to this lies in the division of Ireland. I say this not as a propaganda statement, nor seeking to make excuses for failings both North and South. But the fact remains that this division had profound effects on the way the two parts of Ireland have developed in the past half century, and its effects have been unfortunate in both areas.

First, in Northern Ireland, it placed a minority of the people of the island, who were fearful of the effects of being part of a United Ireland with a large Catholic majority, in a local majority position in part of the island where they had power to work out their fears at the expense of that part of the National majority living in this cut-off area. This in turn created a counter-neurosis in the minds of that part of the Catholic population which found themselves in Northern Ireland, excluded from power, and discriminated against in politics, housing and employment.

In turn in the Republic, or the Free State as it was known for some years, the division of the island had psychological consequences. The 1937 new Constitution, while substituting republican for monarchical forms, also imported into the more secular Constitution of 1922, elements of Catholic teaching in relation to such matters as divorce, social policy, and a reference to "the special position of the Catholic Church as the religion of the great majority of the people".

Thus, on the one hand the discrimination and bigotry that afflicted the North made that part of the country seem alien to the religiously more tolerant people of the Republic. And at the same time, the increasingly Catholic colouration of the Constitution and laws of the Republic, (natural enough in itself because of the overwhelming Roman Catholic majority that resulted from partition), and the evidently strong influence of the Catholic Church on some attitudes of the people with respect to matters of public policy, made the South seem more alien to Northern Protestants than it had been when the country was first divided.

To a certain degree, therefore, partition tended to be self-perpetuating, encouraging the two parts of the island to drift apart.

At the same time, British Government neglect of Northern Ireland, and its failure to tackle abuses there under its sovereignty, made the situation in that area fester, and the sometimes not deeply considered political attitudes in the Republic towards Northern Ireland, often expressed in terms that showed little understanding of Northern Protestant attitudes, tended to increase the strength of the Northern Protestant determination to remain separate from the South.

This is the background to the crisis of the past six years - which itself was sparked off by the Civil Rights issue - which drew much of its inspiration from the Civil Rights movement in the United States in the earlier part of the 1960's. A new generation of Northern Catholics led by young leaders determined to challenge their second-class citizenship, demanded the Civil Rights of which they had hitherto been deprived, and an end to discrimination. Resistance to this peaceful agitation by the Northern regime led to violence, and in the crisis of mid-August 1969, to urgent demands by the Catholic minority for immediate

protection by the British Government and army from the violence that threatened their very existence.

While this help was extended, and while it gave a measure of protection to the minority for a period, the situation this created was nevertheless potentially explosive.

This was so, first, because of the questionable activities at certain times of the British army which tended, in the eyes of the minority, to overshadow its role as their defender. Second, while the minority secured the bulk of the legal reforms demanded, the slowness of the pace of change and the apparent lack of practical effect of the changes which were agreed to kept dissatisfaction high. Thirdly, a new wave of extreme Republican violence both heightened tension among Protestants encouraging the emergence of extremist Protestant para-military groups, and ultimately reversed the role of the British army, which after a time found itself facing attack from a section of the community it had been brought in to protect

The resulting situation was made even more difficult and violent by the tendency of extremists on both sides to split into different groups. The result is that there are now at least seven or eight Protestant para-military organisations and four Republican groups, apart from local breakaways. These divisions amongst the extremists in both communities have added internecine violence within each side to the bitter intercommunal violence.

In the resulting situation opportunities for gang and mafia-type activities have enormously increased - resulting in protection rackets, illegal drinking clubs etc., especially on the Protestant side. Moreover both sides have sought within their own communities to impose their own type of discipline by terror - by murders and knee cappings. Most recently of all there has been the large scale development of sectarian murders, many quite indiscriminate, emanating initially from the loyalists, but extensively reciprocated now by Republicans.

Thus, both communities are now terrorised,

1. by explosions and sectarian murders from the other side, generally quite indiscriminate in character
2. by protection racketeers and the imposition of discipline by violence by para-military elements within their own community and,

3. most particularly in the case of Catholics - by harrassment by the British army - searching for Republicans carrying on a campaign against them - although this harrassment was much eased from mid-1974 onwards and has of course been much reduced during the period of the Provisional IRA cease-fire.

It is impossible to describe the effect upon life in Northern Ireland of the bewildering proliferation of violence from so many sources which leaves everyone feeling threatened at every moment of their lives.

This atmosphere of constant violence by which every Irish person in Northern Ireland is constantly threatened, and from which during this year only one group of people have been relatively free - viz. the British army because of the Provisional IRA cease-fire - has created grave difficulties for politicians seeking to find a solution to the six-year-long crisis. On the Protestant side, popular opinion has during the past eighteen months swung towards extremism, something like 85 percent of that Community supporting politicians adopting "hard line" positions. By contrast on the minority side, public opinion has continued, as to the vast majority, to support the moderate political leaders of the SDLP who in election after election have, together with the small middle-of-the-road Alliance party, secured something like three-quarters of the minority vote.

Rejection of violence, and support for moderate policies by the vast majority of the minority is the one continuing bright spot in the situation, offering hope for an eventual political solution.

The primary concern of Irish Government policy has to be the security of lives in Northern Ireland - above all those of the Catholic minority, vulnerable in East Ulster where Catholic communities are isolated in the midst of an overwhelming Protestant majority. This is necessarily the major determinant of Irish Government policy and all other considerations have to take a second place in the short run.

From what I have said you will see that the nature of the problem, as seen in

Ireland, has changed over the years. The aspiration to a United Ireland remains unchanged but the minority in Northern Ireland do not see this as an immediate solution or aim of policy in view of the possible consequences for them of any attempt to pursue this in the short run. The same is true of opinion in the Republic which throughout remains very close to that of the bulk of the minority in Northern Ireland for whom the sympathy of the people in the Republic is intense.

The immediate aim of policy is and has to be to find a way in which the people of Northern Ireland can live together in peace and join together in common institutions and in the Government of the area on a basis that excludes discrimination and second class citizenship from which the minority suffered for so long.

They, and we in Republic, see the need and opportunity for close cooperation between a power-sharing administration emerging in Northern Ireland and the Government in the Republic. We naturally hope that from such cooperation in time will come the realisation by a majority in Northern Ireland of the common interests of North and South, and the advantage to both of common institutions. But we must also recognise at this stage the strength of current Protestant opinion in Northern Ireland.

Despite the violence between extremists in the two sections of the Northern communities, and the resultant fears and bitterness, these tragic years have nevertheless helped both the minority in the North and the people of the Republic to understand that a million Protestants in Northern Ireland are equally Irish and must have a full say in any solution. One by-product of this period has been a weakening of the sense of identification of many Protestants with Great Britain and a recognition that their future lies in the corner of this island in which they live.

No Irish Government could contemplate or would want to contemplate the coercion of a million Protestants. As Cardinal Conway has said, they cannot be bombed into a United Ireland.

The problem lies - in the existence of a million Protestant Unionists on the island - not in the role of Britain, however responsible Britain was for the initiation of partition and for the history of the earlier centuries which have led to the situation. Less than two years ago at the Sunningdale Conference, the British Government for the first time agreed to support the Unity of Ireland by consent, thus aligning itself with the position adopted by the elected representatives of the minority in the North and of all the political parties in the Republic.

What the people of Northern Ireland need most of all now is understanding and compassion - not just from the Republic, not just from British Government and people but also from those outside Britain and Ireland and above all, from the Irish Community overseas.

1 October 1975