

# NATIONAL ARCHIVES

## IRELAND



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## TOAST REMARKS

SPEAKER THOMAS P. O'NEILL, JR.

Taoiseach, Distinguished Guests, my Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Later this year these halls in Dublin Castle will see the political leaders of European Communities gathered, under the chairmanship of the Irish Government, to debate and decide issues of major importance to everyone living in Europe and indeed to those of us who live across the seas. 100 years ago it was most unlikely that a Jack Lynch would even see the inside of Dublin Castle, except perhaps in the interrogation wing. 100 years ago it would have been almost unthinkable that a Thomas Patrick O'Neill would be welcomed in Dublin Castle as the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives. The fact that you are honouring the United States Congress here this evening and the fact that you will be exercising the leadership of Europe here later this year are a measure of the success of the Irish in Ireland and the United States. Long may it continue!

It seems to me that in recent years there has been a change in the nature of the relationship between Ireland and America. That relationship has always been and of course remains based principally on ties of family and friendship. Until recent

years, however, there was a certain tendency on the part of Irish-Americans to regard the country of their ancestors as a homeland which, however sacred in our racial memories, had many of the characteristics of chronic underdevelopment. The Ireland of today remains precious to us of course as the land of our roots and the symbol of all that is Irish. But those of us who visit Ireland and read about it have been surprised at the dramatic economic development of recent years and the significant role which Ireland now plays in the world and particularly in Europe. We are proud of your achievements. This is the change that I refer to in the relations between Ireland and America. Ireland is no longer a beloved symbol of a tortured past. It has become for us the Irish in America a dynamic proof of the vitality and energy of our race.

The past is of course important to all of us and I believe that the Irish in America as well as the Irish in Ireland are increasingly taking a mature view of our joint heritage. The Government of Ireland, in letting us have the exhibition of Treasures of Early Irish Art for the past three years, have helped enormously in educating the Irish-American awareness of this great legacy. On behalf of the hundreds of thousands of Irish-Americans and indeed other Americans who

have been thrilled by this record of 4,000 years of Irish civilization, I would like to thank the Irish Government and the people of Ireland. We are aware that there were very understandable concerns on the part of the Government in this country about the safety of those priceless artifacts. I can only assure you that the exhibition has, more than any event in recent times, given the Irish in America reason to take pride in their heritage.

The past for the Irish is of course also full of tragedy. One of your great writers, James Joyce, yearned "to awaken from the nightmare of history." While the torment of that nightmare is still playing itself out in Northern Ireland, it affects all the people of Ireland and indeed concerns the Irish in America.

Northern Ireland is a very complicated situation produced by historical forces which often seem destined to defy resolution for generations to come. For as you once so eloquently stated, Taoiseach, the conflict produces "its own momentum, its own instability and its own tragedy."

Nevertheless I believe that there is a choice before the people of Northern Ireland and before us all: are the

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people of Northern Ireland to be the prisoners of that history condemned to repeat in every generation that nightmare of violence and hate or are they to overcome the past and share together in the shaping of their future. For those of us Americans who are concerned about Ireland, the specific challenges are: are we to connive at the perpetuation of this nightmare or are we to help in whatever way is open to us to end this tragedy.

It is clear to me that the people of Ireland generally have in this generation taken a constructive and realistic attitude to the problem of Northern Ireland and I believe that the same process is going on among Americans of Irish descent. I am of course like many in this room by tradition an Irish nationalist. I would like to see Irish unity and indeed I believe it is the only ultimate solution to the problem. I would not however wish to impose it against the will of the people of Northern Ireland and I would not wish to promote it at the expense of Irish lives and the right of a whole generation of young people to happiness and stability.

It was only four years ago that an Irish American journalist wrote that "Americans, even those of us of Irish background, are curiously silent and apathetic" concerning the trouble in Northern Ireland.

Since then the President of the United States Jimmy Carter has issued a policy statement calling for an end to violence and offering American aid in job development and business investment in Northern Ireland. As Speaker I have joined my colleagues in the House and the Senate in calling for an end to violence in the North and finally that Irish American journalist is now the United States Ambassador to Ireland, William Shannon.

While it is not for Americans to say to the parties involved: this is the solution or this is the path to be chosen, I have been deeply concerned by the lack of political progress in Northern Ireland over the last few years. Consequently together with all sides in Ireland we insist that Britain bears a heavy responsibility for the failures of recent years on the political front. We have been concerned that the problem has been treated as a political football in London or has otherwise been given a low priority. So far as I am concerned, there is no more serious problem on the agenda of British politics than a crisis which has claimed 2,000 lives and caused almost 20,000 serious injuries. It is not our concern to favour one party or another on the forthcoming elections in Britain but we do insist on an early, realistic and major initiative on the part of the incoming British

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Government so as to get serious negotiations moving quickly towards a just, realistic and workable solution.

I would repeat what I said at the Ireland Fund dinner on May 10th in New York last year: to those who tell me that if I do not support the supporters of violence I will come under political pressure; I would say: I do not want the votes of those who support the killing of innocent Irish men, women and children. And if the democratically elected Taoiseach of Ireland, my friend Jack Lynch and the leaders of the Opposition parties in Ireland my friends Garret Fitzgerald and Frank Clusky, who have much more to lose than I have on this issue, tell me that there are organizations in the United States which are linked to those who are doing the killing, I will listen to them and I hope that my political colleagues and opponents and all my fellow Americans will do the same thing.

Taoiseach, Distinguished Guests, my Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen, this is a proud evening in my life. My forebears came from Belfast, Buncrana and County Cork. Here this evening there are people who themselves come from those places. I am proud to be with you, I admire your achievements. My colleagues and I bring you the good wishes of your millions of friends in America.