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Northern Ireland

We must all be conscious of the fact that even as we gather here, the tragedy of the North continues. Violence, suffering and death are a normal part of everyday life. There are whole neighbourhoods which can hardly remember normal conditions and where thousands of young people have grown up knowing only tension and strife.

The need for a solution becomes increasingly urgent. Unless one can be brought forward soon the situation could well become irretrievable. We know from history that, under such stresses it is possible for society to deteriorate beyond recovery. In the view of some observers, Northern Ireland may well be on the verge of such a phase.

The picture is a depressing one. Agriculture and industry in Northern Ireland now produce less than in the early 1970s. The population has been static or has fallen. Unemployment in some places is more than 20%.

In these conditions, feelings of hopelessness, isolation and despair among individuals and families can become so deep and so widespread that the will to restore the values and relationships of a normal society may well disappear over large areas and leave behind communities which are utterly deprived in human and social terms.

Surely the fine people of Northern Ireland deserve better than this.

The situation is urgent because time is running out. The time for a solution is now and that solution can only come through political action.

All but a tiny minority understand that violence can never bring a solution and that it serves only to perpetuate division and hatred.

Let us make it absolutely clear that no Irish Government will tolerate any attempt by any group to put themselves above the law or to arrogate to themselves any of the functions of Government.

There is one army in this State, one police force and one judiciary, appointed under the Constitution, to uphold our laws. The Government, acting for the people, will ensure that these laws are effective and are enforced. Democracy will be defended and the rule of law upheld. That is an essential element of national policy.

For over sixty years now, the situation in Northern Ireland has been a source of instability, real or potential, in these islands. It has been so because the very entity itself is artificial and has been artificially sustained. In these conditions, violence and repression were inevitable.

Should the present Constitutional Conference help to ensure civil rights and equality for all the people of Northern Ireland and to ensure also that security operates impartially, then so much the better. But the Conference itself cannot provide a conclusive settlement. We must face the reality that Northern Ireland, as a political entity, has failed and that a new beginning is needed. The time has surely come for the two sovereign Governments to work together to find a formula and lift the situation on to a new plane, that will bring permanent peace and stability to the people of these islands. No settlement can be contemplated now which merely sows the seeds of future discord.

There are massive financial, security and constitutional questions to be solved, guarantees to be worked out. But a start must be made. In my view, a declaration by the British Government of their interest in encouraging the unity of Ireland, by agreement and in peace, would open the way towards an entirely new situation in which peace, real lasting peace, would become an attainable reality.

For our part, we gladly declare that we have no wish to dominate or coerce. The evils of domination and coercion at the hands of others are too deeply embedded in our folk memory for us ever to start down along that reprehensible road.

Let me also say that in any discussion or negotiation which may be embarked upon, or any settlement which may be proposed, the safety

and welfare of our fellow countrymen of the Protestant faith in Northern Ireland would be for me, personally, a special priority. I have lived among them as a boy. I know their qualities, I admire their virtues; I understand their deeply held convictions. It would be my concern to ensure that their place in the Ireland of the future was secure; that their talents and industry were given every opportunity to flourish; that their traditions were honoured and respected.

Northern Ireland casts a long dark shadow into every corner of these islands. The effects of the violent and unstable situation there are felt in a hundred different ways.

Because of it, political life in this part of the country is a great deal less fruitful and constructive than it would otherwise be. We are forced to accept unpalatable measures, restrictions and curtailments of freedom that are alien to our outlook and our character.

In the economic situation that confronts us, the cost of the security measures directly attributable to the Northern situation—about £70m.—is becoming increasingly onerous for us to bear. It represents an allocation of scarce resources that could well be used for many urgent desirable social purposes. Northern Ireland distorts official relations between Britain and Ireland. It hinders too the development of friendship and co-operation at every level between ordinary people in these islands who have such a great deal in common and who have such close personal ties going back over many generations.

Perhaps more than anything else however, the situation in the North prevents the coming together of all our cultural traditions in a full flowering and the harnessing of the energies of all the people of this island in a combined effort for their betterment, their welfare and their happiness.

We look forward to some new free and open arrangement in which Irishmen and women, on their own, without a British presence but with active British goodwill, will manage the affairs of the whole of Ireland in a constructive partnership within the European Community.

This Government see Northern Ireland as the major national issue and its peaceful solution as our first political priority.