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57TH FINE GAEL ARD FHEIS

RA. 519284

Saturday, 29th March 1980.

7.30.p.m.

Dr. Garret FitzGerald, T.D.

President, Fine Gael.

Northern Ireland.

Of the many issues I have to deal with in this, my third Ard-Fheis Presidential Address, I have decided to speak first about Northern Ireland, and our relationship with that part of our island. I do so for two reasons, over and beyond the inherent importance of achieving peace and security for the people of that area.

First, I believe that unless this problem is resolved by agreement, the peace even of this part of Ireland will be incomplete, and all our achievements here over 60 years will be threatened. Second, I give this issue special priority at this time because I believe we now could be at the point where, for the first time in years, and following the adjournment of the Conference between some of the parties in Northern Ireland, a serious attempt may be in preparation to find a solution to what an important part of British political and public opinion has begun to discern as a much larger, and a more urgent problem, than they have seen it to be hitherto. I am confirmed in this impression by a visit to London a week ago, and by many of the contacts I had with parliamentarians and others during my five days there. For our part, we should be preparing ourselves seriously to play an active and constructive role in such events as may be to come.

We must make a clear distinction here between two aspects of this problem. First there is the immediate issue of replacing direct British rule in Northern Ireland by devolved self-government on a basis that will involve the participation, of both sections of the community there. Second, there is the question of the development of a new relationship between North and South.

So far as the first of these is concerned, Britain certainly has the crucial role to play by taking an initiative in order to secure movement on the devolution issue amongst Northern Ireland politicians, some of whom have got stuck in a rut on this matter.

so far as relations between North and South are concerned, the chief responsibility falls to us, Irish men and women in Ireland, and we should not slave-mindedly seek to abdicate this responsibility to Britain.

Of course here also Britain has a constructive role to play. Thus there would, I believe, be merit in British politicians saying publicly what many of them say privately; that the logical, ultimate, solution is an Ireland ruled by Irish people in harmony with each other. Modern Britain, as its inhabitants clearly see, has no interest, financial, strategic, or other, in the continuance of a British presence in Ireland, which constitutes indeed a burden on our neighbour's very strained financial and military resources, as well as a strain upon her general credit throughout the world.

At Sunningdale a statement along these lines was made solemnly by the British Government of the day, a Conservative administration, pledging its support, (and that was the word used), for a united Ireland, should such be the wish of a majority of the people in both parts of this island.

I have always thought it a pity that after Sunningdale British politicians chose to relapse into an embarrassed silence about that part of their solemn declaration. We, for our part, have honourably, and time and again, reiterated our solemn declaration of that time, to seek unity only by agreement. I hope and expect that the British Government of to-day, and the Opposition, stand by that solemn pledge, and that they will find it appropriate to repeat it. Many Northerners of all shades of opinion would prefer to know plainly where they stand, and where stands Britain, than to have this issue apparently fudged, as it has so often seemed to have been, since 1973.

But it is one thing to seek a decisive British initiative on devolved self-government based on the participation of elected representatives of both sections of the community in the North, combined with an honest and constructive re-statement of how Britain sees the future of North/South relations in an Ireland ruled by agreement amongst Irish people, as I hope the Taoiseach will do when he meets the British Prime Minister. It is quite a different thing to propose, or to hint at, the imposition of a 'final solution' by Britain over the heads of the people of Northern Ireland, or, as some would have it, an abdication of British responsibilities there, risking another kind of 'final solution'. The likely results of

On an abidcation were sketched out by John Hume several years ago - massive violence followed by a re-partition that might postpone indefinitely any possibility of unity.

Our duties in this matter are clear. First we must unambiguously reject these latter approaches, which depend upon unilateral action by Britain to resolve the Irish problem. Instead we must hold firm to our commitment - shared by all three parties for many years past - to seek unity by agreement and consent freely given.

Second, all parties here must avoid the temptation to seek easy votes by verbal republicanism or by phony high-profile exercises in tub-thumping abroad - tactics that for half a century postponed progress in North-South relations, and which, if reverted to again now, could put off a solution indefinitely.

Third we must set out clearly just what kind of united Ireland we envisage. This involves much more than merely saying how far we are prepared to go to 'guarantee' the rights of the million Northerners we are seeking to influence. That would <sup>do</sup> no more than mitigate an obstacle to a solution, but it is our task to make a new North-South relationship positively attractive to our fellow-Irish men and women in the North. No, we must go far beyond mere 'guarantees', making it our task to show just what advantages the North and its inhabitants could gain from a new relationship with us; how their role in the world and their dignity as a people could be enhanced by giving them an equal voice in the foreign and EEC policies of this island; how their security could be improved; how their economic and social progress could be advanced.

Fine Gael has presented its ideas on these matters in its Northern Ireland policy, published over a year ago, which secured a respectful hearing in Northern Ireland - where people are increasingly listening to what we have to say; which has evoked deep interest in Britain; and which was twice generously saluted by the then leader of Fianna Fail, Jack Lynch, as a worthwhile and serious exercise.

Let Fianna Fail follow our example by formulating a Northern Ireland policy. Two years ago that party announced, close on our heels, its intention of preparing and publishing such a policy. When I asked the present Taoiseach about this policy document, into the preparation of which many people in Fianna Fail have put much effort, he seemed to

repudiate it with these words:

"The policy on Northern Ireland was clearly and specifically enunciated by me and endorsed by the 49th Fianna Fail Ard Fheis this year".

But <sup>by</sup> no stretch of any Cumann member's imagination can the Taoiseach's no doubt carefully-chosen Ard-Fheis paragraphs be read as offering one word of guidance as to what kind of united Ireland Fianna Fail envisages, or what attractions / <sup>such a united Ireland</sup> would be likely to hold for the million people in Northern Ireland whom we have to convince on this issue.

I hope the Taoiseach will re-consider this short-sighted approach, and, that whatever difficulties or divisions there may be within Fianna Fail on this issue, he and his party will decide to make a constructive contribution towards Irish unity by spelling out their vision of the future of the Irish people together - and by doing so in advance of the forthcoming Dail debate on Northern Ireland.

If they see another path forward than ours, one that could realistically attract support in Northern Ireland, then let it be spelt out and debated. But if there is not, and if the silence of Fianna Fail on the future shape of a united island indicates that they share our vision, let them say as much, and let us follow together the path towards an Irish Confederation, based on mutual interests of North and South, which we have put forward.

In the meantime, I hope that they will follow the lead we gave in Government, and have continued to give in Opposition in another way, by entering into and maintaining contact with the people of Northern Ireland. Let the Minister for Foreign Affairs go to talk with the Loyalists of Sandy Row and the Shankill; let him address gatherings of the SDLP and Alliance parties; let him invite Northern politicians of different complexions to social functions at his Ministry here, or at his home. What I and my colleagues, like Paddy Harte, did while we were in Government, and have been doing since then in Opposition, Fianna Fail should also do, if they are serious about this problem. If they fail to follow us in this, our people will in time start to ask: Does this

indicate that Fianna Fail are not serious about the problem? Or does it mean that they are simply not acceptable to the people of Northern Ireland as partners in dialogue - in which event they would stand exposed as obstacles to Irish unity, rather than as a party treading the path forward towards this goal.

I now turn from this issue, concern for which provided a large part of my motivation for entering politics fifteen years ago, to other issues affecting the domestic affairs of this State. I came into politics from a career of involvement with private and public enterprise, with economics, and European Community affairs. I did so not without hope that this experience might enable me in time, through the political process, to contribute also to the work of government, where economic issues loom large, and knowledge of industry and its problems, and of the implications of EEC membership for agriculture are relevant.

As a member of a Government for over four years I found myself in a team faced with massive problems unleashed on us by the first oil crisis, including an inflation to which we in government did not contribute - unlike our successors.

Within two years of the height of the world economic crisis we had turned this situation around.

#### Fianna Fail Failures.

All the benefits of this achievement, the result of skilled economic management in the years immediately prior to 1977, have today been dissipated.

Thus this year our national output is unlikely to increase at all.

Unemployment has started to rise again; the official seasonally-adjusted figures show real increases in the two successive months, January and February. If this trend continues unemployment will again be over 100,000 by the end of the year.

The rate of price increase has trebled from 6% to about 20% within two years, most of this being the result both direct, and, through its effects on pay claims, indirect, of the Government's actions in cutting food subsidies and in raising taxes on foods twice since they came into power.