



**An Chartlann Náisiúnta**  
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Address by the Tanaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs,  
Mr. Dick Spring, T.D.,  
to the British-Irish Association Conference  
at Cambridge

Edmund Burke once declared that the English had only one ambition in relation to Ireland, which was to hear no more about it.

Much has changed since Burke's day, but his complaint still strikes a chord of recognition. Coverage of Northern Ireland all too often prompts recourse to the switch-off button, either physically or mentally. Stereotypes crowd the places where fresh political thinking should grow: The inhabitants of Northern Ireland are assumed to be the inventors and sole proprietors of a baffling private quarrel. One side is as bad as the other, - and never worse, as Seamus Heaney points out. Their politics are unfathomable and beyond rational influence. And - most important of all - the problem is insoluble. The best efforts have already been made, and no better efforts are called for until the inhabitants have changed their nature and obliged us all with a problem of more convenient dimensions. It is especially bad form to suggest that the Irish and British Governments should jointly take upon themselves the task of squaring-up the problem in its present, very inconvenient dimensions. When I myself committed this heinous crime some weeks ago, the whiff of brimstone was widely registered - and not just in Ballymena!

In pleading for greater attention and more dynamic thinking to be brought to bear on this problem I know that on this occasion I am preaching to the converted. I am glad to acknowledge the distinguished record of the British-Irish Association in promoting mutual understanding between the two islands. I myself have drawn great benefit from the dialogue in this forum on many occasions. Secondly, the topic of this year's Conference - the

Report of the Opsahl Commission - is itself a cogent refutation of many of the stereotypes I complained of. I believe we are all in the debt of those who conceived and carried through this work. It is an invaluable stimulus to fresh thinking, and I can think of few better starting points for a discussion of the Northern Ireland problem. The Report shows clearly that beneath the apparently frozen lines of political confrontation, there is a rich and sophisticated process of reflexion in many quarters in Northern Ireland. It dispels any stereotype of Northern Ireland as a society which is somehow bereft of political thinking. It shows that it is rather a society which has so far failed to find a generally acceptable framework to channel the imaginative ideas and to harness the desire for lasting accommodation which lay behind many of the public submissions.

I confess there was one aspect of the Report which gave me pause, when it explains a certain lack of urgency by the fact that "the conflict is manageable". That suggested the disheartening notion of a society resigned to its own political failure, as people might accept a natural affliction. It implies that the tragic and avoidable deaths of innocent victims may be treated as inevitable because change would be troublesome and many have no difficulty, as the saying goes, sleeping on another man's wound. The horrific upsurge of killings recently, which plunged yet more families into grief, and widened the circles of communal fear still more, cries out for a different and more urgent response than a complacent sense of the conflict being manageable. Many submissions to the Opsahl report speak of the middle class opting out, cocooning themselves, and even in some cases drawing wealth from the Troubles. The areas of persistent violence, which are often the deprived areas, are in a twilight zone that is neither war or peace. They are caught between the hammer and anvil of the security forces and the paramilitaries, neither of whom can really win, and neither of whom can really lose as matters stand. The only certain losers are the communities themselves.

It may just possibly be legitimate to use the word "manageable" of that situation, but I believe this ignores other factors. It assumes that a society of that kind can subsist indefinitely in a condition of sullen stalemate. It assumes unchanging attitudes of the wider British and Irish populations, who are presumably the ultimate "managers" at present. It ignores all the corrosive long-term tendencies which will attack such a society from within, and make its supposed "manageability" more and more questionable. Anyone familiar with the situation can readily identify such trends over the past two decades. It ignores also the cumulative costs in terms of lost opportunities because of this sterile quarrel. This is a liability we in the South also have felt keenly, as we struggle to build our economy and modernise our society.

It is axiomatic that no accommodation can take hold in Northern Ireland without the consent of the two communities there. A condition of peace and stability is agreement between the unionist and nationalist traditions, leaving aside for the moment what the content of such agreement might be. This does not however mean that the two communities therefore bear the brunt of the responsibility in the search for progress. We in the wider British and Irish communities owe it to the people of Northern Ireland to acknowledge that the quarrel is not merely a baffling local phenomenon. It flows directly from the troubled history of our two islands. We have swept the unresolved issues into Northern Ireland, ironically the spot where the conflict of allegiance was always most virulent. Since then, we sometimes seem to be saying to the communities there: "We know your differences are a product of history - our history, and not just yours. We would like you not to take the unresolved issues so seriously, just as we don't. Even if they are precisely the issues which divide you so bitterly, it is for you to solve them for us, rather than for us to solve them for you. So please come to us with an agreed recommendation about them, and we will implement it."

I agree with Mr. Molyneux that there are issues which are really for decision by the Governments and the wider entities, just as there are decisions, for example cooperation in any devolved structures, which are for the Northern communities alone.

In addressing these issues I believe there is a simple and pragmatic goal we should aim for. For lack of a better word I would call it simply a sense of "ownership" by the people in their institutions of Government.

One part of Ireland has created political institutions whose "ownership" by the people they govern is not at issue, however uncomfortable and severe successive politicians, including myself, might find the public's judgement on our stewardship. In Northern Ireland that "sense of ownership" belonged entirely and exclusively to one community. The reasons are complex, but they include the baleful legacy of the partisan manoeuvres at Westminster in the early decades of this century, which greatly complicated the search for inter-Irish agreement.

It was very false to see Ulster unionism as a mere creation of British opponents of Irish nationalism. Most nationalists would now agree that the reality of Unionism was greatly underestimated by nationalist leaders. But the terms in which the debate took place - or, rather, mostly did not take place - were greatly coloured by the belief that unionists had exploited British imperialist sentiment to secure the coercion of nationalists in Northern Ireland. That new minority, as nationalists rarely failed to point out, was proportionately much greater than the unionists themselves in Ireland as a whole. Our common need now is to dismantle the perception thus bequeathed to Irish nationalists of Britain as the sponsor and exploiter of division in Ireland. We must in a sense revisit the arrangements of the Twenties, not to deny the realities of nationalism or unionism, which the statesmen of those days grappled with by their lights,

but to seek to reconcile them, with all the insights we have  
once gained, in a better and more imaginative way.

Starting from that basic test of "ownership" of institutions, we know that the unionist community at present cannot conceive of ownership of any institutions which would involve them in Irish unity. Equally we must accept that the nationalist community in Northern Ireland shows no sense of ownership of institutions which come in purely British livery, and has been consistent on this point over several generations. As the Opsahl report points out, that community has the critical mass to resist imposition, just as unionists have in relation to Ireland as a whole.

It seems in those circumstances we either resign ourselves to the undesirable option of political arrangements neither community "owns" - and direct rule probably falls into that category - or we set as our goal the creation of a new and as yet undevised cooperative model which both can "own". What we cannot expect to work any longer is a system which one community "owns" and the other does not.

Consequently, if we are sincere about wanting progress, we have no choice except to be ambitious and innovative and ready for change on all sides.

We must start from the point, highlighted as a basic proposition in the Opsahl report, that Northern Ireland is sui generis. As a matter of empirical reality, we must indeed reject the proposition "that Northern Ireland is like any other part of the United Kingdom". The concern to match constitutional theory and philosophy with the complicated reality of Northern Ireland is not a task confined to one side of the Irish sea only, although I accept wholeheartedly that this challenge is relevant also to our own jurisdiction. I hope everyone will accept that the present Irish Government has made clear its readiness to meet it.

On both sides we have constitutional doctrines on Northern Ireland which can appear one-dimensional when set against reality. We have inherited these, and I do not believe that if we were making a fresh start today we would choose to reinvent them or express our respective relationships to Northern Ireland in those terms. Douglas Hurd on a number of occasions, including at a recent BIA Encounter meeting, has spoken very eloquently of the ideal relationship between the British and Irish Governments as one of partnership rather than as rivals for sovereignty. I believe he epitomised in that notion a programme for both Governments whose potential we still have to explore.

In relation to Northern Ireland both Governments must strive to realise a different vision. Rivalry in sovereignty is essentially a contest over which of two theoretical oversimplifications may be invoked in Northern Ireland. Up to this both have been invoked more often in strife and anger than for constructive purposes. I would like instead to see Britain rivalling with Ireland in its eagerness to build bridges, "to abolish the memory of past dissensions" and to enable all those who inhabit Ireland to find, by agreement among themselves and without external hindrance, arrangements and institutions which all could endorse and support as their own. I would like to see Ireland rivalling with Britain to make sure that unionists felt certain that political change in Ireland was irrevocably conditional on respect for their rights and their sense of identity and allegiance. We will know that we have solved the problem when the unionist community in Northern Ireland becomes the special human and political bond of cohesion between Britain and Ireland, rather than the focus of contention history has sadly made it so far.

To achieve that outcome we must single-mindedly use all our assets to pursue agreement as our paramount goal. These assets are considerable. There is in Ireland now a Government with the will, the authority and mandate to take fundamental decisions on

this issue. We are partners with the British Government in the Anglo-Irish Agreement. We can and should be partners in the search for new arrangements that might bring lasting peace.

The British Government has the preponderant weight of its resources at its command. The British role is a key stake for all the protagonists in Northern Ireland and that is a major source of influence which can be brought to bear for progress.

The people of Northern Ireland, in the Report's words, "do want dialogue at every level". That is a significant point of encouragement even if, understandably, they are deeply divided about the outcome that dialogue should lead to.

That situation reminds me somewhat of the problem, all-too-familiar to Governments nowadays, where the public will fervently agree on the need for financial cutbacks, but on the unspoken assumption that the burden deserves to fall mainly on some group other than their own. In such situations agreement will rarely be found unless models and options are sketched out, for example by the Government or the social partners, which people can ultimately rally to, even if with reluctance, because they recognise that they are intended to be equitable and for the general good.

I see an analogy in the search for progress on Northern Ireland. Let me put my position as plainly as I can. It is an inescapable requirement that any lasting arrangement in Northern Ireland should meet with the consent, or, as I put it earlier, attract the "sense of ownership" of both communities there, and no arrangement which permanently fails that test can provide a basis of stability. That means addressing all strands of the relationships, and it was an important achievement of the last Talks process that this was generally accepted. There can be no question of disregarding the opinion of the communities in

Northern Ireland as the ultimate and necessary test of acceptability for arrangements there.

There is no contradiction between that principle and a recognition that different agencies may have - indeed do have - different roles and responsibilities in the search for that goal. The role of the Governments is to give leadership and to put in place all the factors in their control so as to ensure optimum conditions for progress. I believe we cannot overlook the key role of Northern political leaders, but it does no particular service to them to lay on their shoulders responsibilities which lie elsewhere. The menu from which they are asked to choose has always been defined by the Governments.

I have a frustrating sense that we may now have all the pieces of a jig-saw which might spell peace if only we had the skill to fit the pieces together.

We have a willingness for dialogue in Northern Ireland and the important foundations laid in the last round of Talks.

There is a partnership between the two Governments which is exemplified by the Anglo-Irish Agreement and whose potential remains fully to be explored.

There is a manifest community of interest between all the people of Ireland in many fields, and indeed between the peoples of both islands.

There are extensive agreements of principle on many aspects of the conflict - the need for total mutual respect between the two traditions, the futility and obscenity of violence, the need for "a new beginning" and a different foundation for relationships.

We have the asset of helpful outside concern, for example from the European Community and the United States. Both have already

in different ways, a proven track-record of benign involvement and assistance. (On this last point, I believe strongly that we should focus on that benign record, and not on preconceived notions, when considering their potential role for the future. We must be careful not to take the attitude, as some almost seem to do, that they would prefer to keep the problem unsolved rather than to admit that an outsider, even one bound by the closest ties of friendship, could contribute to the search for progress. I think we are fortunate that the protagonists in the Middle East did not take that view of Dr. Opsahl's Norwegian homeland, or of the United States, for that matter).

To piece the jig-saw together we need above all fresh thinking. The firm objective of both Governments is to lead all back to the table without delay. I would suggest that all those entrusted with political responsibility in Northern Ireland have a political, and indeed a moral, obligation to resume dialogue. Not to do so would be to fail to answer the clear demand of all our people. It would also be to enlarge the vacuum in which only the paramilitaries can thrive, as the deplorable violence of recent weeks confirms yet again.

Getting to the table is important. It is, nevertheless, only a means to an end. That end is to find the way all of us in Ireland can live together in understanding, mutual respect and peace. For that we need above all fresh thinking and political imagination on all sides. The Opsahl report has already helped us to focus on that need and set us an example. It is both an inspiration and a challenge. I am happy this evening to pay tribute to that achievement.