

THE NEW NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

31 August 1998

'EVERYONE WILL HAVE A VITAL VOICE IN THE NEW NORTHERN IRELAND' - SAYS MALLON

Deputy First Minister Designate, Seamus Mallon MP, sketched a bold and dynamic vision today of how the new Northern Ireland can be constructed in the era of the Good Friday Agreement.

Mr Mallon, was addressing an international audience at the 'Vital Voices' Conference which opened this afternoon in Belfast's Waterfront Hall. Describing the challenges ahead as 'possibly the most awesome journey ever undertaken in the history of this island', he said the Agreement has produced the 'site and design', now it was time to build.

"The first of these challenges is for each party to make space for others. As political leaders we have a responsibility to represent the interests of those who have mandated us. There is a greater good - and a wider responsibility - which transcends our own sectional interests and that includes making space for our partners in this political process.

"The road to the future is always under construction. It can never be a finished product. In implementing the Agreement there are no precedents to follow or to draw from... What we have is a blank page upon which we are privileged to be able to write our own history. Together in partnership and inclusivity, and with tolerance, we will do just that."

Mr Mallon pointed out that the new Northern Ireland will be founded on the core principles of justice, equality, and inclusivity which will be safeguarded in every area of life:

"My vision is that we will not just make it work, but that we will make of the Agreement an outstanding model of governance - our own shining city on the mountain... let our ambition be that over time people will look to Northern Ireland to learn how we have used this unprecedented opportunity for renewal and birth..."

Turning to the conference agenda, the Minister encouraged the participants to focus on areas which will be of key importance here:

"A key task of the Agreement is the establishment of a Consultative Civic Forum. There is also provision for a Consultative Forum in relation to the North-South Ministerial Council. How should we decide participation in these fora?"

"More generally, how should we reform the system of public appointments? Do we need to maintain the huge range of quangos in Northern Ireland exercising executive, advisory and tribunal functions? Can we be satisfied that they are representative?"

"Can we be content that according to a recent study women account for only 32% of board members and that 21 boards have no female members at all? In the Northern Ireland Civil Service only 9% of the Senior General Service is female. These figures are not acceptable. In the Executive we will seek to learn from your experience in tackling such issues."

Mr Mallon said the Executive would build on the commitment of the present Government in Targeting Social Need and would look at the example of the EU Peace & Reconciliation Programme in its use of target groups for the distribution and use of funds.

Economic development, he said, had much to learn from European models in the application of knowledge, teamwork, and creativity and he cited the success story in Germany where enterprises are encouraged to mesh equality of opportunity with Total Quality Management – the Total E-Quality Award Programme.

"New investment is always a potent force for change. It draws new attitudes and new skills into the community. The new style business is in many ways a mirror image of the new style political process. Both are learning organisations based on knowledge, partnership, and creativity. Both will stand or fall on how well their leaders work with their partners and with others."

And in closing he told the audience:

"You are partners in the great task that awaits us. Your presence in the Waterfront today gives me great confidence that together we will succeed in breaking free from the past, and in so doing create our own shining city on the mountain top."

VITAL VOICES

Ambassadors, Secretary of State, Minister Wallace, Lord Mayor, ladies and gentlemen, I welcome you warmly as I welcome the opportunity to address the opening plenary session of this important and timely conference.

Your conference title is particularly apt - it is imperative that vital voices be heard at this crucial time.

We need to hear them because we live in a society where words can kill and where words must heal. We need to talk creatively about the politics of life and unequivocally about the politics of death.

Even as we sit in this building some vital voices echo from the immediacy of the past tragic weeks. That of Rev William Bingham when, after the tragic burning to death of three young brothers at Ballymoney he posed the moral question to those involved in the Drumree stand-off: "is any march worth a single death". That voice was vital; it was courageous, thankfully it was heard.

I think also of the voice of the mother in Omagh whose 18 year old son was murdered in the bomb explosion, sobbing the words of Mahatma Gandhi:

"There is enough love in the world to neutralise the hatred of millions."

That poignant voice was more than just heard; it inspired us all and stirred the quiet whisper of conscience that made us collectively resolve that violence would never extinguish democracy, or diminish our united will to be at peace with ourselves and with others.

You join us as we set forth on possibly the most awesome journey that has ever been undertaken in the history of this island. Our vision, and opportunity reflect something afforded to few societies – the chance to begin again. That has been made possible by the Good Friday Agreement, endorsed by the people of Ireland, North and South, on 22 May 1998.

But the Agreement is a beginning, not an end. If I may use a building analogy, the site and design have been agreed; the construction now starts. As with any building the construction process brings many challenges of its own, some foreseen at the design stage, some not – especially when the project under construction is a condominium!

The first of these challenges, is for each party to make space for others. Yes, as political leaders we have a responsibility to represent the interests of those who have mandated us.

But those responsibilities must be balanced by the needs of the wider process. There is a greater good – and a wider responsibility – which transcends our own sectional interests and that includes making space for our partners in this political process.

We must, with urgency, create that space, not just for the sake of our partners, but for our own sake too. The logic of signing the Agreement is that it was in our own interests and that of the wider community. It follows, therefore, that the difficulties of our partners are our difficulties too – in addressing our problems; in solving them on a reciprocal basis and in giving the political process a unity of purpose, we can be lifted above party political considerations.

Chairperson,

The road to the future is always under construction. It can never be a finished product. In implementing the Agreement there are no precedents to follow or to draw from. There are no templates from which we can model our new Assembly, the North/South Council of Ministers, the proposed British-Irish Council or the Civic Forum. What we have is a blank page upon which we are privileged to be able to write our own history. It is a task that is given to few. Together in partnership and inclusivity, and with tolerance, we will do just that.

In the Agreement we have written a charter of principles which must underlie our new democracy. They are equality, parity of esteem and parallel consent. They symbolise the sense of partnership at the core of the new dispensation – because, put in its simplest term, without equality partnership is a chimera.

In relation to these principles, the Agreement is specific and precise, with formal consequences set out in detail. Firstly there is a commitment to put in place

A new programme for government will be agreed. This is not the time to set out detailed proposals. But it is the time to set ourselves targets and to organise our efforts. I have my own vision. It is not just to get all the elements of the Agreement into place and working. I know we can and will do that; I also know that the people of Northern Ireland and of the wider community in Ireland, in these islands, in Europe, in the United States will insist that we do that. My vision is that we will not just make it work but that we will make of the Agreement an outstanding model of governance, our own shining city on the mountain. It has been said that the new Executive and Assembly will be the most closely scrutinised and most commented upon polity of its size in the world. Indeed it will; but let our ambition be that over time people will look to Northern Ireland to learn how we have used this unprecedented opportunity for renewal and rebirth:

- to succeed in delivering efficient, accountable, transparent government;
- to create an inclusive society in which equality is not seen as a zero-sum game but as a way of redefining relationships to everyone's benefit;
- to harness our educational and industrial strengths to a new approach to regional development, ensuring that Northern Ireland becomes a nimble player in the global economy with high employment, high wages and high productivity;
- to pioneer new approaches to the problems of social exclusion building on the rich experience of local community development and reconciliation groups which have been the source of so much strength and hope during our darkest days;

- to succeed in transforming and modernising our public service; building on its strengths to make it more efficient, less bureaucratic, more responsive to the needs of our citizens;
- to succeed in nurturing the artistic and creative talent of our people who have the immense advantage of being able to draw from two major cultural traditions;
- to succeed in putting into place new cross-border structures of co-operation and implementation which will serve as a model for inter regional relationships throughout the world.

This is the kind of ambition which I am confident will be shared by the members of the Executive and supported by the Assembly in the coming weeks and months.

This is why your conference has come at a crucial moment. Your deliberations will be of great importance to us, reflecting as they will, the views of people from Ireland, North and South, Britain, Europe, and of course, the United States.

Let me look briefly at some of the issues which you will be discussing in your working groups, issues which are central to the success of our efforts. As regards Participation in Public Life, a key task of the Agreement is the establishment of a Consultative Civic Forum. There is also provision for a Consultative Forum in relation to the North-South Ministerial Council. How should we decide participation in these fora? More generally how should we reform the system of public appointments? Do we need to maintain the huge range of quangos in Northern

Ireland exercising executive, advisory and tribunal functions? Can we be satisfied that they are representative? Can we be content that according to a recent study women amount for only 32% of board members and that 21 boards have no female members at all? In the Northern Ireland Civil Service only 9% of the Senior General Service is female. These figures are not acceptable. In the executive we will seek to learn from your experience in tackling such issues.

As regards Legal and Social Progress I have already outlined the fundamental changes which the Agreement will bring in relation to rights and the structure of statutory bodies. We know, however, the limits of legislation; throughout Europe there is still a 30% pay gap between men and women. Thus we shall be building on the commitment of the present government to the Targetting Social Needs programme, the deliberate direction of resources to the most disadvantaged areas, groups and individuals, identified by objective criteria of need.

It will fall to us to ensure that the identified need for a new TSN - a reinvigorated version of the initiative - is fully met. We will be looking at the lessons to be learnt from the European Union Peace and Reconciliation Programme which not only targets groups and areas but uses them as players in the development, distribution and use of funds.

Much of what we will do mirrors programmes which have been undertaken in the United States and in Europe. Indeed it is interesting to note that the European Union - which has been in the forefront of ensuring a legal right to equal pay and equal

treatment between men and women - has extended that concept of discrimination in the Treaty of Amsterdam to include race, sexual orientation, disability, age and religion. We shall be working closely with the European Commission and with interested parties in other Member States to bring these matters forward.

We will tackle these matters, not as pious platitudes, not as meaningless clichés, but as practical politicians, seeking quantifiable results. Jules Feiffer wrote:

"I used to think I was poor. Then they told me it was self defeating to think of myself as needy. I was deprived. They then told me that underprivileged was overused. I was disadvantaged. I still don't have a dime. But I have a great vocabulary".

Finally you will be looking at economic development and opportunity in a time of change. For me this is a vital issue. New investment is a potent force for change. It draws in new skills, new attitudes into the community. The new style business is a learning organisation based on knowledge, on teamwork, on creativity. Businesses are finding that promoting the equality agenda can give them a competitive edge.

I have been looking at the experiences in Germany where enterprises are invited to take part in a Total E-Quality Award Programme linking equality of opportunity with Total Quality Management. It is no coincidence that the most competitive and successful companies which have been winning the award. Many of you have experience of business. I look forward to studying your recommendations in this area

so that we can take account of them in drawing up our economic and employment strategy.

Chairman, ladies and gentlemen, I appreciate very much your commitment to the success of the Agreement. You are our partners in the great task that awaits us. Your presence in the Waterfront today gives me great confidence that together we will succeed in breaking free from the past, and in so doing create our own shining city on the mountain top.