

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

IRELAND



Reference Code:	2011/127/1008
Creation Date(s):	April 1981
Extent and medium:	7 pages
Creator(s):	Department of the Taoiseach
Access Conditions:	Open
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Northern Ireland

W. Kinnear's
draft - for Ard Fheis
speech. 11 April 1981

At the Ard Fheis last year, I said that the artificial political entity of Northern Ireland had clearly failed. I said that attempts to deal with the problem purely in terms of the internal administration of Northern Ireland were destined to fail. Finally, I declared that the issue must be raised on to a new plane for consideration directly between the two Governments involved. That objective has been achieved. Into a situation where the prospect had been for continuing stagnation or, alternatively, for a futile detour down a political cul-de-sac, we have brought movement, hope, the beginnings of progress along a road that opens up the possibility of an end to the continuing anguish in Northern Ireland.

We have rejected the counsels of despair of such false prophets as Dr. Conor Cruise O'Brien. Instead we have steadily and assiduously pursued a constructive and forward-looking policy. And we have achieved results.

Since last year's Ard Fheis, I have had two full meetings with the British Prime Minister. At our first meeting on 21st May, I put our views on the situation in the North before the Prime Minister and she for her part explained to me how she saw matters. The outcome of our discussion was set out in the joint communique issued after the meeting. That communique stated that while agreeing that a change in the constitutional status - the current factual status - of Northern Ireland would only come about with the agreement of a majority there, I re-affirmed the wish of the Irish Government to secure the unity of Ireland by agreement and in peace. In the communique we also recorded agreement on the need to further the unique relationship between the peoples of the two countries in the interests of peace and reconciliation. We also settled that we would initiate a series of regular meetings.

At the first of these meetings, held in Dublin on 8th December last, we took a further major step forward. The outcome of that meeting was of the highest significance. What was that outcome? Reduced to its essentials, it represented an

agreement by the two Governments to work together, to set in train a process to achieve peace, reconciliation and stability and to improve relations between the peoples of the two countries. The process has commenced with joint studies by officials of both Governments of a wide range of issues approximating to what the Dublin Communique called the totality of relationships between our countries. A further step in the process will be my next meeting with the British Prime Minister which, it has been agreed, will be specially devoted to consideration of that totality.

What is it, what does it mean, this totality? It means many things. It refers to a set of relationships bequeathed to us by geography, by history, by movements of population in both directions. It embraces extremely close trading and financial relations, overlapping citizenship rights, extensive cultural and sporting exchanges, mutual contributions to the development of political thought and institutions. It reflects a tangled history of co-operation and of conflict, recently portrayed on television to large audiences on both sides of the Irish Sea. It is a relationship which is highly complex, with a multiplicity of facets, including many features that do not correspond to the usual pattern of relations between states.

In general, relations between the people of these islands, the ordinary individuals and families, are warm and friendly and over a wide range, the elements of our unique relationship involve common interests, fruitful exchanges and developing co-operation. We are partners in the European Community. Even in this area of the normal intercourse between any two countries, I do not seek to exaggerate the accord between us. In some economic areas as with the Common Agricultural Policy within the European Community our interests do not run in parallel. In international affairs, we do not always see things the same way. At a more mundane but no less important level, much remains to be done in dispelling misconceptions and stereotypes inherited from the past which obscure mutual knowledge, and understanding. Among some of our own people, there remains a tendency passively to absorb or to copy what comes from Britain and we face a continuing effort to maintain our distinctive cultural identity. Some ^{differences} differences are in the

nature of things, or are desirable as contributing to cultural diversity but ^{in other cases,} where it is possible, we must work to narrow ^{the} ~~them~~ ^{difference,}

I say this as leader of a party which came into existence in opposition to British attempts to limit the sovereignty and independence of the Irish people. But it was never our policy to encourage or cultivate antagonism towards the British people. On the contrary, it was a constant theme of our founder, the late Eamon de Valera, that he wished to foster the growth of a close and enduring friendship between our two peoples. That is an objective and a policy I am happy to carry forward today, from the firm base of sovereignty, of independence, of self-confidence, of a respected place among the nations of the world that Ireland enjoys today.

In no way will we turn back from our policy of developing the friendly relations we enjoy with countries throughout the world. Nor is there any question, of diluting our commitment to the goal of European integration or of failing to press forward with the very welcome intensification of our relations with all our partners in the European Community. There need be no clash, there is no clash between pursuit of these aims and the perfectly natural development of the unique relationship with our closest neighbour, Britain, of what our 1975 policy document on Northern Ireland called a harmonious relationship.

As I have said, in a great many spheres we already enjoy such a relationship. But there is one jarring note. One vital issue stands out as certainly constituting in Western Europe terms, in this last quarter of the twentieth century, a unique element in the relationship between neighbouring peoples. I refer, of course, to the continuing tragic situation in Northern Ireland. We have seen over the last twelve years, loss of life, injuries and destruction on an appalling scale. Worse still, this represents the culmination of sixty years of sterile conflict, of political bankruptcy, of economic deprivation. Some may wish to turn away, to keep those concerned at arms length. But this party will not turn away, I will not turn away. This political desert, this economic wasteland is being created not on some far foreign field. This is happening in a cherished part of our own country, where the first traces of human habitation in Ireland were

found, in a province which was the scene of our national epic cycle, the oldest vernacular literature in Europe, which was the cradle of political republicanism, which pioneered an industrial tradition in which we can all take pride and which today contains a million and a half individual Irishmen and women. I say, with Parnell, that we cannot spare a single one of them, whatever their creed, whatever their tradition. The suffering is the suffering of a cherished part of our own people and the situation in Northern Ireland is central to the totality of relationships within these islands. ^N/ I say we have seen too much suffering, too much killing, too much despair. It is time for a concentration of political attention and talent, for a sustained political endeavour, for the creative development of political arrangements that can break out of the ~~political~~ impasse and prevent the emergence of a state of permanent instability. Again there are those who suggest that this is not helpful, that it is wrong to be actively working for Irish unity, that we should acquiesce in the continued paralysis of direct rule which even the British politicians and administrators who oversee it have characterised as a political paradox and an administrative nightmare. I want again on this great occasion, this coming together of our party, to reject that view, to say, openly, proudly and without equivocation, ~~on~~ that be it, in the long term or in the short term, we seek the unity of Ireland, and of the Irish people, by consent, in harmony and in peace. As I said in the Dail last May, this aspiration for unity is a fact of politics, of the deepest feeling and sentiments of the vast majority of Irish people everywhere, an aspiration that will not go away as long as Irishmen and women inhabit this island. It is something to which I am deeply and personally committed.

I am not suggesting that we are on the brink of achieving unity this year or next year. It would be unrealistic to think that there could be any immediate or speedy solution to such a long-standing and difficult problem. What I do say is that steps must be taken, that steps can be taken and that steps have been taken to establish a new framework for a political solution that will end the violence and prevent its recurrence.

Before I say more about that framework, let me say what has to be said about violence. I condemn all arbitrary and unlawful violence from whatever quarter but as the Taoiseach of the Irish people, I condemn in particular the violence perpetrated in the name of Irish unity. As the largest political party in Ireland, as the legitimate and democratic representatives of the Irish people, of those who seek and work for the unity of Ireland, we repudiate the right of those concerned to speak or to act for our people. Given the history of this country, given in particular the history of the Six Counties, we cannot be without some understanding of their motivation and of their way of thinking, of how they have been drawn into and trapped on a treadmill of horror and of death. But we deny their legitimacy, we say their analysis is perverted, we say it cannot be right nor can it promote a union of hearts and minds to kill and wound Irishmen and women - or Englishmen or Scotsmen - or to pull down the economy of Northern Ireland. We say that for those who have rejected the political process, there can be no political status.

Let me come back to this political process. I have re-affirmed our aspiration, our ultimate objective. I do not say that the destination which we aim to reach is necessarily the same as that which the British Government have in view. But we have agreed that the links between the peoples of the two countries have been put under strain by division and dissent in Northern Ireland. In that context, we have accepted the need to bring forward policies and proposals, to achieve peace, reconciliation and stability and to improve relations between the peoples of the two countries. And we have commissioned joint studies.

It may appear that some of the work on these studies is not concerned with the central elements of the problem. But taken together they should lead to greater mutual understanding, enhanced co-operation in vital practical areas and in the identification of institutional structures which will adequately correspond to the totality of relationships, as I have described it. I believe that ultimately such developments cannot but advance the day of national unity. I would hope that as the process develops, it will be seen, more and more clearly as time goes on, not as threatening but as conferring undeniable benefits and opening up fruitful possibilities for all people, of every

tradition, in this island. The timescale of evolution will be dependent on our dedication and skill in the task of persuading our fellow-countrymen and women, of bringing them to see the advantages of our coming together in this small country, of encouraging them to take up the opportunity to move out of their present narrow confines into a partnership which would of course acknowledge their distinctive traditions and give recognition to the special relationship that exists between Ireland and Britain. No one can deny that the energies and talents of Ulster men and women have never been fully released or employed since that imposed artificial settlement of 1921. They have been locked up in a situation which permits of no expansion and no forward movement. That those energies and talents are considerable the history and achievements of Ulstermen and women in other lands amply prove. *or Today, in my own land* how much the richer would we all be if we could draw, in constructive endeavour, on the political talents of a John Hume, a Seamus Mallon, a Paddy Devlin or the industrial skills of the workers of Queen's Island or of Antrim Town. We must work to create the conditions for new arrangements in which Northern Ireland's political leaders would no longer be frustrated by the impotence of their present confined and repetitive politics but could step forward to play their full part in a new developing situation which offers immense possibilities.

We have begun well, let us continue well; and let us reiterate again that we seek no dominance, threaten no coercion. If it is true, as we have recently been told, that the ultimate concern of the loyalist community is not now the Union itself but rather the preservation of the Protestant way of life, ^ethan the whole situation becomes infinitely clearer and, in my view, more capable of solution. We will not underwrite positions of privilege but we will certainly provide any guarantees of civil and religious liberty which might be required in the context of a new Ireland.

Such an Ireland would open up possibilities for us all beyond our present fears and imaginings. Such an Ireland would answer to an aspiration which beats in more than southern hearts, which would have great political and economic, deep cultural and perhaps above all psychological satisfactions to offer. Towards such an Ireland

we have taken the first steps. Let us go on with confidence in our cause. In the words of Abraham Lincoln in his second Inaugural Address, let us, with malice towards none but with charity for all..... strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nations wounds, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.