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I appreciate your kindness and hospitality in inviting me to address your Current Affairs Society. It is a privilege and a challenge for me as Secretary of State to address an audience of young people in the context of current affairs. I certainly look forward to your comments and questions after my speech.

During the European elections, I found myself talking to candidates for the European Parliament who had been born since the European Community was conceived in the 1950s. I cannot help reflecting that the oldest sixth-former here was not born when the present period of Troubles began twenty years ago.

It is a profound sadness to anyone of my age, and particularly anyone in my position, that young people in Northern Ireland have lived all their lives against a background of strife and violence.

Inevitably, I have had a good deal to say about the security situation in recent weeks, and that is what journalists seem always most interested to hear about. I have, however, been making a series of speeches, and talking about other issues which are also important, such as education and training, tourism, and the allocation of the money that the government spends in Northern Ireland. Today, I want to talk particularly about political matters.

All of us want to see a better and more peaceful future for Northern Ireland. I do believe that could be achieved. I hope you believe that it is possible too, and will not be tempted into thinking that political violence is an inevitable and natural state of affairs. It isn't. There is a better way, and I want to share with you my thinking about how Northern Ireland might be able to look forward to a better future.

In talking about the future, we can never forget the past in Northern Ireland. The past has shaped the present. Sadly, the

history of this island has left a legacy of conflict in Northern Ireland. There is no escaping the fact that there is a deep division in the community between two cultural, political and religious traditions.

Better, I believe, to be honest about that division than to pretend it does not exist; and much better to try to understand, respect and accept the existence of different traditions. The sad fact of the past, and the present, is that so many of one tradition have felt unable to respect or even tolerate the beliefs and values of the other. Too many have believed that one tradition has to "triumph" over the other.

Those who still believe that one side or the other must triumph are really living in the past, I suggest to you. They are condemning the other side as losers, and thus perpetuating the ancient dispute into the future. Some will always wish that the past was different, but none of us can rewrite history to match our aspirations for the future.

We all have to face the facts as they are now. The central political fact is that a clear majority of the people of Northern Ireland wants to remain part of the United Kingdom. But it is also a fact that a minority would like to see Ireland united and the border removed.

How do we resolve this fundamental difference? I accept that it is fundamental. The only way the matter can be decided in a democracy is to respect the wishes of the people. Their decision by a majority - to retain the union - is entirely clear. Northern Ireland will remain part of the UK, unless and until there is a change of mind - and I see no sign or prospect of that in the foreseeable future. I believe passionately that the wishes of the people of Northern Ireland must be upheld.

But I believe with equal passion that those who hold a different view from the majority have the basic human right to express that view and seek to persuade others, through the ballot-box and the

Other products of a democracy. It is vital to our democracy that freedom should exist. Constitutional nationalists accept the democratic principle that the status of Northern Ireland would only be changed by majority consent. All the other constitutional political parties in Northern Ireland, as in Great Britain and the Republic, accept it.

I do believe that the two communities can live and work together, and they need to do so at all levels. The communal divide lies at the heart of our problems. Improving community relations is therefore central to all our policies. The task is not of course one for the Government alone, although we are providing substantial resources to assist worthwhile projects. Many people are working modestly but energetically to break down traditional barriers, remove old fears and suspicions, and help people to understand and respect their differences. I admire their efforts, which offer so much hope for the future.

I do not believe that for most people the two sides of the community are, or need be, so very far apart. They may have more in common than divides them. Isn't the real divide between those who want to live together in peace and harmony, and those who believe in violent solutions which can only drive people apart and destroy? If that is the real divide, how much could be achieved if the political representatives from both communities who reject violence could demonstrate that they really can work together.

No one would suggest that it is easy to make that sort of political progress. Clearly, it has over many years proved very difficult. I do not criticise Northern Ireland's politicians for that.

I try seriously to understand their problems. Like politicians elsewhere, they represent the interests and concerns of those who elect them. If their electors tell them "nothing doing", we should not be very surprised if some politicians pursue a policy of "doing... nothing". If their electors reject all thought of compromise, it is that much more difficult for politicians to compromise.

I sense, however, that the mood of the electorate and the mood of their politicians to a degree is changing. In some district councils, local politicians from the two sides of the community are trying to work together constructively. They are having some success. In Parliament, I was struck by the fact that over half of the MP's from Northern Ireland spoke during the debates on the Queen's Speech, and made a real contribution to those debates. Two themes recurred in almost all the speeches: the need to overcome terrorism and the need to make political progress.

The Government shares those concerns which are linked together. Only the terrorists benefit from a political vacuum. Political progress would deal a powerful blow to those who support violence. But progress will only come about if there is the political will to achieve it. I hope there is that will. I believe it is just possible there may be. All the constitutional political parties appear to recognise that there need to be talks and then negotiations between them. They want to find ways to talk. Some of them are trying to find ways. I respect them for that and I understand such a role as I have. ?

The Government will try to help if it can. But let me make clear that I have no secret plan, no hidden agenda. The agenda for any talks must depend on the wishes of those who would mainly be doing the talking, the politicians who represent the people of Northern Ireland. But I do believe there is some common ground: the parties who would be talking all reject violence; they all support devolution in some form, on a basis which involves both sides of the community; and they all acknowledge the importance of the relationship between Northern Ireland and the Republic.

As I say, the agenda for any talks will be determined by the main participants - but what of the Government's attitude? Tom King long ago made clear that the Government would not wish to set any preconditions for the holding of talks. That means that the Government is willing that others should come to the talks intending to raise issues for consideration which we would not necessarily wish to raise ourselves.

I confirm that. I confirm, too, that we are looking, as I believe the parties are, for ways in which local elected representatives can be more fully involved in the government of Northern Ireland. Let me say a word about that.

Direct rule is not a satisfactory arrangement for governing Northern Ireland. It was never intended to be other than temporary, although it is showing a durability no one could have foreseen in 1972. I and my colleagues do our best to deliver good government to the Province, and direct rule has many achievements of which we can be proud. But NIO Ministers are not locally elected representatives, we are not directly accountable to the people of Northern Ireland, we hold too much power and local people too little. All those criticisms of direct rule I accept.

So the Government wants to transfer power to local institutions. We want to see progress made to or towards devolution. We want to involve local people in the exercise of power. That can only be done under arrangements which could command support across the community. I do not imagine that agreement on those arrangements will be easily or quickly reached. Flexibility will be needed, but, if the will is there, I do believe that agreement ought to be within our grasp.

I am not wedded to any particular model of devolution, nor do I rule out any particular steps down that road, if there is widespread support for them. I would not rule out changes to local government, which some want to see. Nor do I rule out changes in the ways that we handle legislation for Northern Ireland at Westminster, but on that point remember that one Parliament cannot do the work of two. A local assembly could scrutinise legislation more effectively than Westminster could ever find the time to do; and much of Northern Ireland legislation is tailored to the special needs and circumstances of people here.

So I welcome calls for local elected representatives to exercise more power, and I want to find practical and agreed arrangements for them to do so, which we can only do through discussion. I welcome

the fact that the parties are thinking constructively, and their
representatives are talking to us about their ideas. There is much
talking still to do. My door is open, and I say to my political
colleagues in Northern Ireland that they are all equally welcome to
step through it.

Of course I recognise that the Anglo-Irish Agreement has appeared to
Unionists as some great barrier to political progress. I
understand, I hope, the strength of their feeling. They are
entitled to their opinions on the matter, and I hope they will allow
me mine. I do believe that the principles underlying the Agreement
are critically relevant to the people of Northern Ireland and to
their future.

There does need to be the agreement that there is between our two
Governments, reflected in Article 1, that the status of Northern
Ireland would only be changed by majority consent. There does need
to be co-operation across the border to defeat terrorism, in our
common interest. There does need to be a shared understanding that
there are two traditions in Northern Ireland; that they can only
live together on a basis of mutual respect; and that the concerns of
the minority must be taken properly into account in governing
Northern Ireland. And there needs to be political progress within
Northern Ireland.

But let me also make absolutely clear that the sovereign
decision-making power of Her Majesty's Government in this part of
the United Kingdom is in no way diminished by the Agreement. It is
our Government and Parliament that will decide what powers are
devolved to Northern Ireland, and when. The crucial factor will be
the ability of the political parties in Northern Ireland to
co-operate and work together.

The parties will first need to be willing to talk together. I hope
that any obstacles which may seem to exist to talking together can
be overcome before long. I believe they can be, with good will,
since I do not believe the obstacles which some see ought to be
insuperable.

But if they cannot be overcome for the moment, there are more modest and still worthwhile steps that we can take in advance of seeking agreement on any new structures. The political parties can talk together with the Government more regularly about the issues which concern them, security, the economy, the social services - the whole range of issues which Ministers have to deal with. And I can assure those who come to talk that I and my colleagues will always be ready to listen, to discuss, and to respond to reasonable arguments about our policies - as, for example, Brian Mawhinney has recently demonstrated during the consultation on the Education Reform Order. Politicians with their roots here have a real and important contribution to make on behalf of their constituents, and I want them to make that contribution.

There is no easy, quick or single solution to our problems. Only the gunmen of the IRA or the UVF believe there is, and they will not persuade the vast majority of the people of Northern Ireland. Finding a way forward through talking and negotiating may take time, and require a lot of patience, but it is the only way to make real progress. If we are to be able to look forward with confidence to the future, political progress needs to be achieved. I stand ready to do all I can to make it happen.