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ORATION BY THE FIANNA FÁIL LEADER MR. BERTIE AHERN TD, ON
THE 80TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE EASTER RISING, ARBOUR HILL,
SUNDAY, 21 APRIL 1996 AT 12.30 PM.

Is le bród agus umhlaíocht a thagaim anseo inniu mar Séú Ceannaire Fhianna Fáil chun comóradh ceithre scór bliain Éirí Amach na Cásca a cheiliúradh. Cé nár lean sé i bhfad, d'oscail sé doras na saoirse don náisiún seo, agus ghlac an náisiún go léir in Éirinn, agus thar lear, leis an saoirse sin go fonnmhar. Bhí idéil Forógra na Cásca bunaithe ar chearta daonna Poblachta, agus glacaimid leis na dualgais, a leagann sin orainn.

I am particularly proud, in this the 80th Anniversary of the Easter Rising, to honour the founders of our State. The importance of their action of open warfare was not diminished by the fact that it was only of short duration, or by their decision to bring it to an early end. The folly of the British reaction, which led to the deaths of those we commemorate today, contributed as much as the Rising itself to the sea-change in Irish public opinion. From that moment on, the die for independence was cast.

The ideals of the 1916 Proclamation have become the ideals of our State and our Republic. The Proclamation was addressed both to Irishmen and Irishwomen, and was signed in the house of Jenny Wyse-Power, a former member of the Ladies' Land

League. The Republic claimed the allegiances of every Irishman and Irishwoman, and in a first communiqué Pearse wrote : 'The valour, self-sacrifice and discipline of Irish men and women are about to win for our country a glorious place among the nations'. When the Rising ended, Pearse told the women who had helped in the defence that without the inspiration of their courage the Volunteers could not have held out so long. They deserved, he said, a foremost place in the nation's history. He shook hands with each one before they left.

Women played an active and vigorous role in Cumann na mBan and other organisations all through the struggle for independence. In 1914 it was Mary Spring-Rice, who suggested the plan to bring weapons from Germany, which she accompanied on the 'Asgard' to Howth. Countess Markievicz, a colleague of James Connolly, was the first woman to be elected in these islands, and became Minister for Labour, successfully arbitrating in industrial disputes. Kathleen Clarke, widow of Tom Clarke, was a judge in the Republican courts, and chaired a committee of the Dáil to try and reconcile differences on the Treaty. Like Pearse's mother and sister, she was a founder member of Fianna Fáil, although she later parted company. The leading historian of the Irish Republic, and a close confidante of Eamon de Valera, was Dorothy McArdle. In this the 80th anniversary of the Rising, and the 70th anniversary of the foundation of our party, it is fitting that we should remember and acknowledge with special gratitude the crucial role played by women in the shaping of modern Ireland, and their courage and fearlessness in face of danger.

Ireland was more advanced than some European countries in giving women the franchise and acknowledging from the beginning an equality of democratic rights. But we should accept that our State, particularly in the earlier decades, disappointed some of the expectations of those women who contributed so much. It did not

encourage as much as it might have done the full participation of women in public life or other spheres of employment, particularly once they were married. One contribution that we can make today to keeping the ideals of 1916 alive is to foster the spirit of partnership and equality between men and women, which existed when the nation was being forged. Women should be able to look forward with encouragement to playing a full role in every aspect of our society.

I am proud that our party for the first time has three women on our front bench, our deputy leader Mary O'Rourke, Máire Geoghegan-Quinn and Síle de Valera. This week, we introduced a new Deputy from Donegal Cecilia Keaveney to our ranks in the Dáil, along with Brian Lenihan, whose illustrious father gave so much to Ireland. I would like to pay tribute to the work of the Dublin Fianna Fáil Women's Group in their contact work both with prisoners and all sections of the community in the North, including the Unionist women whom they recently invited to a conference in Dublin. In this 80th anniversary of its proclamation, our Republic can also be proud that we have a first distinguished woman President in Mary Robinson.

O thús ama in Éirinn ghlac mná na tíre páirt lárnach i saol na staire agus na scéalaíochta.

Le Cinnirí mar Macha, Maeve, Gráinne Mhaol, Markievicz; le mná mar Mary Aikenhead, Mary Martin, Catherine McAuley; le mná an lae inniu mar Adi Roche, Mary Robinson, Sonia O'Sullivan, Mary O'Rourke agus go leor leor eile, tá obair an náisiúin á dhéanamh faoi stiúir na mban, ar bhonn cothrom leis na fir. Sin díreach mar is cóir. Chuirfeadh sin áthas agus bród ar Chinnirí na Cásca.

The role of women in our history has not always been sufficiently highlighted.

History itself is a continuous process of discovery and the development of a deeper understanding of our past. Our history, like our language, is one of the central elements in our national identity. I deplore the suggestion that history should no longer be regarded as part of the educational grounding and civic training of every young Irish citizen. I cannot understand how the Irish Labour Party, founded by James Connolly, could be party to such an idea, inspired no doubt by motives of social engineering or technocratic indifference. Fianna Fáil in Government will ensure that history remains in its rightful place as a core subject at least to junior certificate level.

We are privileged to have with us today Thomas Keneally, a world famous Australian writer of Irish origin, first Chairman and now a director of the Australian Republican Movement. A great deal of his much admired work draws its inspiration from history, and shows much sympathy with the downtrodden and oppressed of all races. Australia, like the United States, has a close relationship with Ireland, and the growth in Republicanism has highlighted how much both countries have in common, although I appreciate that Australian Republicanism is more than just Irish in origin. You are very welcome here among us.

We in Fianna Fáil, who represent the democratic Republican mainstream tradition on this island, must renew our commitment to equality in all its forms, and in both parts of Ireland. This involves equality of rights, equality of treatment, and equality of opportunity. We are a party that must never forget our radical roots, which enjoins upon us to cherish all the children of the nation equally.

There is still much deprivation and exclusion in our society, which cannot be run solely for the benefit of the big battalions. We have to reorganise the way we do

things. We have to take positive affirmative action to ensure that people from more socially deprived areas, rural and urban, get the same life choices as others, so that they can look forward to their fair share of employment. If we have to reserve first call on a proportion of places in colleges, and in employment in the public service for people from areas of high unemployment, then let us do it. We must root out the with the same determination as New York City drug dealers, who contribute to the degradation of certain areas. As the American experience shows, there is a direct correlation between unemployment and wage increases and excessive regulation, and those who will most directly face the consequences of the choices to be made should be there at the table.

We in this party are determined to give those who need employment a fair chance wherever they live and to stop the scandal of urban blackspots, which the various public agencies do not want to know. Lower income workers must get the significant tax relief they were promised in the Programme for Competitiveness and Work, as the continued neglect of the PAYE worker in the last two Budgets will undermine social partnership and cohesion. In Government over the years, we have brought about many important social improvements, and provided modern facilities in towns like Tallaght. But there is a mountain of work still to be done. We have no lingering ideological hang-ups of either right or left, which will prevent us from doing all that is required.

We live today in a democratic pluralist society. No minority should be treated as outcasts or objects of fear and hatred. As Dáil Éireann declared in 1922, the Irish nation consists of no one class or creed but contains all. They are all our people. The Jewish Congregation were given in 1938 a recognised place in our Constitution, and its members have from that day to this played a prominent point in our public

life. Nevertheless, in the presence of the author of Schindler's List, we should express regret, that the official ethos of the time discouraged us from accepting more Jewish refugees from central Europe during the last war. But equally today we can only deplore the renewed outbreak of conflict in the Lebanon and in Israel, which has created more refugees and horrific civilian deaths, where what is needed are an immediate cessation of hostilities, and a comprehensive negotiated settlement.

Most of the problems that we face in our world today are no longer susceptible to a solution by violence. What happened here eighty years ago was at a time when the whole world was at war or in turmoil, and in an age, when great Empires claimed the right to rule other countries and peoples. The solution of the problems which we face in Ireland today require the use of exclusively peaceful means. Fianna Fáil believe that the right of national self-determination, the formal recognition of which we finally secured from the British in the Downing Street Declaration, remains valid for Ireland as a whole, provided it is exercised democratically in accordance with our international engagements and international law. We cannot and should not use the right of self-determination to attempt to ride roughshod over what is at present a Unionist majority in Northern Ireland. In his writings, especially on language, Pearse was opposed to coercion of other traditions. In virtue of our own Constitution, as well as for other reasons, self-determination can only be exercised North and South separately and concurrently, as in all long-partitioned countries. A right that has been acknowledged by both Governments in conformity with international law, an international law which also requires adherence to peaceful means, cannot constitute a reason or mandate for armed struggle. We, the Irish people, have an inalienable right to decide at different periods of our history how our national rights will be vindicated.

The principle of consent has more than one application. The task ahead is to find an agreement, which can win the consent of both traditions on this island, a new political dispensation that covers the totality of relationships. The present position in Northern Ireland does not have Nationalist consent. We adhere to the view that the Framework Document, which envisages rigorous equality and partnership within the North, as well as North-South institutions with executive, harmonising and consultative powers, and a balanced constitutional accommodation provides the essential basis for a political settlement. But we also need to develop a better atmosphere of trust, and the spirit and habit of cooperation, as the basis for bringing the people of Ireland closer together.

Rebuilding confidence in the peace process is the immediate task ahead. Fianna Fáil will give every possible support to the efforts being made by political leaders to achieve this. Unfortunately, the British Government since March 1995, and to a lesser extent the Irish one, lost the confidence of many Nationalists by the mismanagement of the peace process, during the 17 month ceasefire. Unionist demands were made, and parts of the Government here seemed to be more interested in chasing after an unresponsive Unionist leadership than consolidating the democratic nationalist consensus which underpinned the peace. The original IRA ceasefire was sealed by a handshake between Albert Reynolds, John Hume and Gerry Adams on the steps of Government Buildings. A serious mistake was made last autumn by the Taoiseach, when he refused a request for a meeting with John Hume and Gerry Adams. It seemed to send a signal that the Taoiseach was not interested in carrying out the responsibility for maintaining the democratic Nationalist consensus which he inherited from Albert Reynolds. Earlier, he allowed without protest, indeed with tacit approval, the Secretary of State to disqualify Sinn Féin six months after the ceasefire from its full democratic negotiating rights,

because it was unable to accede to new demands on decommissioning. Let it not be forgotten that it was the Tánaiste Dick Spring who was responsible for changing the management of the Irish peace process at a critical moment, and who was so confident that the peace process would be just as safe in his hands. When nurturing a fragile confidence was so important, was it really the best moment to substitute a warm admirer of John Redmond for the leader of Fianna Fáil, the mainstream Republican movement in this country? Some of the right things are now being done, which we support, but it is a great pity that they were not done earlier, when they would have evoked a much more positive response.

Another mistake made mainly by the British Government was that the small gestures that would have made a visible impression on the people on the ground were not made. Prisoners, both Loyalist and Republican, were callously treated as political pawns. Paddy Kelly should have been transferred to Portlaoise. Permanent statutory funding was not provided to Irish language schools. New investment was very slow in coming. The Springvale Project and the future of the Royal Victoria Hospital remained in doubt.

When the ceasefire broke down, our Government showed unfortunately a lack of political courage, and retreated with unseemly haste to a position of political correctness. The willingness to take risks, to be extremely firm with all parties which brought about peace in the first place, was absent. They cut off all contact with the Sinn Fein leadership at once at political level, without making any last appeal or seeking a personal explanation, for the breach of the August 1994 ceasefire. They immediately suspended the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation, at a time when it was most needed, a Forum, to which unfortunately neither the Taoiseach nor the Tánaiste showed any real commitment in terms of attendance, in

contrast to Fianna Fáil both in Government and Opposition. We indeed now have the absurd situation that even without a ceasefire Sinn Féin would be able to sit in the Northern Forum, which is modelled on the Forum in Dublin, yet they cannot sit in the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation. The Government have turned down repeated requests from this party for an emergency session of the Forum, which is not being allowed to make any contribution to the reinstatement of peace.

One of the tragedies of the last year is that, despite no doubt the best of intentions, we have had a Taoiseach and a Government that were not up to the task of preserving the peace. I nevertheless wish them well and will support them in their efforts to restore a peace that should never have been allowed to break down.

Because of these bad experiences, the two Governments will have to provide definite assurances of good faith that the peace process will be handled differently and with more generosity and flexibility in the future. The Unionist people also need to decide whether they are prepared for the sake of a secure peace to share Northern Ireland and its institutions as partners with Nationalists, and whether they are prepared to participate in closer North-South links, which can be established without prejudice to their existing preferred constitutional status. Everyone has to pay a certain price for peace.

Militant Republicans should realise that we as a country have come far, through the efforts of preceding generations, and through the more recent political progress that has been made. As a well established independent State, we have the wherewithal and the friends to build over time freedom and justice throughout Ireland by purely peaceful political means, if we are prepared to act together. Such means are in better keeping with the democratic dignity inherent in Republicanism. Continued

solo sporadic violence at this stage and the uncertainty it generates is holding back the progress of the Irish nation, without any long-term political advantage to be gained. The actions that have happened since February have not brought any honour on the cause of the Republic. They have in fact undermined it. I would urge Northern Republicans to take full part in negotiations on a political settlement, and not allow themselves to be excluded from the political process. Fianna Fáil had to make difficult and even humiliating decisions in 1927, but we never regretted them afterwards. They should give their confidence to their skilled political leadership, and accept that there are no short-cuts to Irish unity. Only a peaceful, long-term strategy has any hope of success.

The strength of the democratic cause in Ireland and of political unity behind it is far more powerful than any paramilitary violence, which is incompatible with peaceful persuasion. Let us together through peace and democracy realise the progress and unblock the energy that will bring the people of our island closer and that is alone capable of bringing about justice. That is the best way today of fulfilling the ideals of 1916.

Sna ceithre scór bliain ó Éirí Amach na Cásca, tá gach iarracht déanta againn idéil an Fhorógra a láidriú. Tá fad bóthair siúlta againn, agus fad eile le siúl

"ar an ród so romham"

mar a dúirt Pádraig Mac Piarais. Siúlfaidh Fianna Fáil an bóthar san leis na boicht, leo siúd ar an imeall, ar son na ndaoine atá lag agus faoi chois. Téann obair Éirí Amach na Cásca ar aghaidh, linne.

Go raibh míle maith agaibh.