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His Speeches
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*Address by the Taoiseach, Mr. John Bruton, T.D.,
to the Oxford Union,
Wednesday, 7 May, 1997*

Mr. President,

I am honoured by your invitation to address the Oxford Union this evening.

I do so with a sense of history, a theme to which I will return shortly.

I do so also with a sense of immediacy. On this, a visit during which I will meet, for the first time as Prime Minister, Tony Blair and his colleagues, I come with a sense that an historic breakthrough is possible in Northern Ireland.

A detailed plan for peace is already in place. It consists of two elements:-

- a talks process open to all parties and involving the two Governments;
- an end to IRA violence.

The Irish Government has, with the British Government, delivered the first element - the all inclusive talks process. The talks opened in Belfast on 10 June last year and resume, following national and local Northern Ireland elections, on 3 June, less than four weeks from to-day.

I welcome Dr. Mowlam's statement on Saturday, on her appointment as Secretary of State, that it is her aim, through these talks, to reach a fair, long-term political accommodation. At my meeting tomorrow afternoon with the Prime

Minister, I will be offering the whole-hearted co-operation of the Irish Government in this project.

It is now time for the Republican Movement to deliver the second element of the peace plan - the long promised IRA ceasefire.

The Republican Movement should make up its mind, once and for all, unreservedly to enter the political process, and throw away for good the crutch of violence or threatened violence. Once it does that, the road to peace and prosperity is open to all.

This moment of opportunity was not easy to construct. There have been difficult and patient negotiations along the way but the plan for peace now available includes the following elements. Many of these were put in place during the IRA ceasefire, giving the lie to the myth that "nothing happened" during the ceasefire. Let me list the elements of the plan for peace already in place:

- first, the Irish and British Governments have agreed the Joint Framework Document. This document, jointly launched by John Major and me in February, 1995, sets out our shared understanding of the political structures which might form a basis for a comprehensive political settlement. It commands the support of all the major political parties in Dublin and in London;
- second, to deal with decommissioning, an International Group, chaired by Senator George Mitchell, was set up and has reported to both Governments on how the issue might best be dealt with.
- third, the parties already in the talks have successfully negotiated Rules of Procedures. These were published on 29 July 1996 and are there for all to see;
- fourth, a role has been agreed for a group of independent, impartial, international chairmen. They have already shown their considerable skill, energy and patience;
- fifth, the Dublin Forum for Peace and Reconciliation has reported. For fifteen months, Sinn Féin had the opportunity to work with all the political parties represented in our parliament and with the SDLP, the Alliance Party and the Workers' Party from Northern Ireland in this Forum. That Forum opportunity will be re-opened for them when the IRA declares a ceasefire;

- sixth, during the IRA ceasefire, the Irish Government joined with others in gaining top level access for Sinn Féin in the United States;
- seventh, during the ceasefire, the British Government rescinded Exclusion Orders [on prominent members of the Republican Movement] in March 1995;
- eight, both Governments lifted broadcasting restrictions on [Sinn Féin] representatives;
- ninth, British military patrolling in support of the RUC in Northern Ireland was reduced by 75% during the ceasefire;
- tenth, the National Emergency was formally ended in my jurisdiction and, with the taking of that step, the Emergency Powers Act 1976 expired;
- eleventh, 36 IRA prisoners in my jurisdiction were allowed early release during the IRA ceasefire;
- twelfth, the Convention on the Transfer of Sentenced Persons was signed and brought into force, opening the way for Irish prisoners in British jails to be transferred to Irish jails;
- thirteenth, the British Government restored remission rates for prisoners in Northern Ireland to 50%. This led to the early release of a significant number of prisoners.
- fourteenth, and most importantly, we set up the all inclusive talks process, open to Sinn Féin, to which I have already referred.

These are but some of the measures taken to facilitate reconciliation for the Republican Movement during the 16 months of the IRA ceasefire, and most of them were done since I became Taoiseach.

There is a phrase in French, "to reunite the circumstances". It means, I think, that a stage can be reached where everything is in place for something to happen.

Everything is now in place to end the agony of Northern Ireland. If we fail to move forward towards a settlement, the excuses for inertia on one side or the other will gain credence.

Is it really our wish to allow hardliners in the paramilitary organisations to argue that the only language other people understand is the language of murder?

Is it really our wish to allow the high priests and reverend doctors of inertia to fall back once again on the delusion that violence is the only thing wrong with Northern Ireland and that the extirpation of certain other political groups is the one thing required for a solution?

Is it really our wish, as Seamus Heaney once said about a political killing, "to hug our little destiny again?"

Mr President,

The republican movement is at a crossroads.

They have said they will end violence if only they can be part of a meaningful negotiation on the future of Ireland. The British and Irish Governments have said that they can be part of such negotiation if only they end violence. If they make good their promise to take the political road, the two Governments will receive them at the gates of Stormont Buildings into inclusive talks where no topic is excluded and all the relevant players are present.

On the other hand, the republican movement may choose not to suspend their campaign of violence at all, or to half-suspend it, and as someone has put it well, to combine syntax and semtex. Under those circumstances the Irish Government and the parties representing the majority of Nationalists in Northern Ireland will not postpone progress in the negotiations in Belfast. The Irish Government will not for their sake withhold the hand of friendship from our Unionist neighbours. The Irish and British democracies will not be the hostages of the republican movement. We want peace, but we will not compromise our democratic values.

Mr President,

Allow me also to address myself directly to Unionists in Northern Ireland.

You will remember the lines of the Northern Protestant poet John Hewitt about his own people:

"this is our country also, nowhere else;

and we shall not be outcast on the world”.

The pressure under which Unionists have been placed by the provisional IRA, not least in border areas, makes these lines especially poignant. I want to say without reservation that the Unionist and Nationalist traditions have equal validity. We recognise the right of the one million Unionists in Northern Ireland to be British - “to be what you are, where you are”, as a party colleague of mine once said.

What my government is looking for today is a recognition by Unionists that Nationalists too must be allowed to be what they are, where they are - to have a system of Government to which they can give full-hearted allegiance.

Unionists have argued that a compromise with Nationalists will not be a compromise, but a first step that will lead inevitably to a united Ireland. There are fears here that must be genuinely addressed. I would not only expect but welcome a searching investigation of these issues by Unionist negotiators at the Stormont talks. That is the best place, face to face across the table, where these fears can be addressed.

What I find more difficult to understand is that after a whole year the talks have failed to move to the consideration of substantive issues within the Three Strands, because Unionists want a tougher position on decommissioning - tougher even than either the Mitchell Report or the two Governments envisage.

Unionists have resisted violent terrorism for twenty-five years. If there was an end to violence, what, by comparison, is there to fear from sitting at a table with Sinn Fein? If republicans cannot bomb Unionists into a united Ireland, how likely is it that they could trick or talk them into it against their will? No chance. Unionists have nothing to fear from talks, once the threat of violence is off the table.

My appeal to Unionists is this. Let us all raise our sights this summer and enter the substantive negotiations. Let us focus on the real issue, which is the content and quality of a comprehensive accommodation between the two communities, the two allegiances, which share the same lands and streets, and will always do so.

Let me now return to the sense of history of which no visitor to your Union can fail to be conscious.

From the 1880's until the First World War, the issue of Home Rule for Ireland was as prominent an issue here in the Oxford Union as in the political life of these islands.

Home Rule sought to accommodate Irish Nationalism by giving a united Ireland local autonomy within the United Kingdom. In this way, it was hoped to solve the two main problems at once: the relationship between the communities in Ireland and the relationship between the two islands. It was an attempt at a new beginning.

The two Prime Ministers most closely associated with this attempt, Gladstone and Asquith, were ex-Presidents of the Oxford Union. I understand that the very first practising politicians to visit the Oxford Union for debates, T. P. O'Connor, Lord Randolph Churchill and John Morley, came here in the 1880s to speak on Home Rule.

On 6th June 1907, almost ninety years ago, the leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, John Redmond addressed the Union on the motion "That in the opinion of this House, Ireland should have the right to manage her own affairs". The motion was carried by 359 votes to 226.

But Home Rule was not to be. Although every family in Ireland, North and South, Catholic and Protestant, had relatives in the trenches of World War One, and although many of the 49,000 Irishmen who died in that war believed that they were fighting for Gladstone's vision of the future, by the time of the Armistice in 1918, history, as history does, had moved on.

The Irish Republic was declared in front of the General Post Office in Dublin at Easter 1916. From this action, in gestation for many years, flowed a more ambitious agenda for Irish Nationalists.

In 1920, Lloyd George's Government brought in the Government of Ireland Act, partitioning Ireland and offering what was in effect Home Rule to each part. But it was too late to halt the course of events.

The Anglo-Irish Treaty was signed in December 1921.

During the Treaty negotiations, Lloyd-George looked forward to a common Irish future assisted by what he described as the "benevolent neutrality" of the British Government.

But the Unionist minority based in Northern Ireland had been determined long since to oppose a united Ireland, even under Home Rule. It was inevitable that they would be reluctant to become too closely involved with an Irish State emerging from the difficult circumstances of 1919 to 1921.

Let us pause here.

The turmoil and suffering of the 19th century had brought forth Gladstone's vision of economic and political justice for an Ireland enjoying Home Rule within the United Kingdom. For some years, perhaps until the fall of Parnell in 1891, it seemed just possible that Gladstone had found the answer to the Irish Question. But in the following generation, up to the Treaty of 1921, events in Ireland evolved rapidly and unpredictably, as indeed could be said of European history as a whole over the same period. Anyone in the 1880s who spoke of new horizons in Irish-British relations was right, but would have found it hard to foretell the solution that came to pass between 1920 and 1922: an independent Irish State in twenty-six counties, deeply divided from the six counties of Northern Ireland, against the background of a political gulf between Ireland and Britain.

The settlement of 1922 was in many respects a success. But we would be doing ourselves a disservice to deny that that settlement, emerging very rapidly in very contentious circumstances, fell short of accommodating satisfactorily the interests of everyone.

The most troubling residue of difficulty was in Northern Ireland.

To speak in crude terms, the problem for London in the 19th century, for Irish Nationalists at the beginning of the 20th century, and for Unionists from the 1920s, has been the same problem: how to conciliate a disaffected minority so that it would not seek to break away but would settle instead for an accommodation within a larger unit.

Westminster, perhaps inevitably, was unable to conciliate Ireland as a whole..

A united Ireland, even under Home Rule, was prevented by the determined opposition of the Unionist minority in Ireland.

In the 1920s, the border made the Unionists in Northern Ireland the local majority. But the border also locked in with those Unionists a new and substantial Nationalist minority.

If majority-minority tension is the subject, and history a camera, then the lens that had taken in first the whole of Britain and Ireland, and then the island of Ireland, was now zooming in on the narrow ground of Northern Ireland. The question was this: could the Unionist majority conciliate their own minority so that Northern Nationalists would accept what had been done and settle down within the new area?

It may be argued whether Nationalists would have ever settled down on the basis of a fair deal within Northern Ireland. They were conscious that a somewhat arbitrary line had been drawn on the map. The rest of Ireland was close by. They, the Nationalists, were themselves in a majority across much of the territory of Northern Ireland. Demography might work in their favour to undermine an unacceptable arrangement.

But whatever the prospects may have been for creating a unified society in Northern Ireland, the effort was not made. The Unionist Party, in government at Stormont for fifty years, did nothing to carry through on an agenda of conciliation, or to co-opt the Nationalist minority to acceptance of the 1922 settlement.

In talking of the residue of the 1920s, I believe that we in the South should recognise that another part of that residue was the narrowness of the society that we ourselves created. In the absence of the countervailing influence of Northern Protestants, our way of life took on some of the assumptions of the Roman Catholic Church of that time. It is important to preserve balance in our judgements. We resisted, let it be said, the forces which in other parts of Europe produced Mussolini's Concordat, and the constitutions of Franco and Salazar. But in the eyes of many Unionists, and of some of our own citizens, the Republic of Ireland was in the 1930's, 1940's and 1950's a place far from the mainstream of life.

In the 1970s, for the first time since the settlement of 1922, a new and broader vision for the future of these islands became possible.

The present era in Northern Ireland could be said to have begun in June 1968 when Austin Currie, formerly of the SDLP and now a minister in my own Government, engaged in the first direct action of the civil rights campaign, by staging a sit-in in a council house at Caledon, Co. Tyrone. Mr Currie was protesting against the allocation of this house to an unmarried Protestant woman instead of to a Catholic family, by a unionist-dominated local authority.

At another level, and as an annotation to my basic point, it could be said that the 1944 Education Act, which meant so much to the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland, was in turn the trigger of the civil rights movement. The generation of Northern Irish Catholics which included Austin Currie, John Hume and Seamus Heaney, and so many other potential leaders in the political and cultural spheres got the education which ensured that they would never be corralled, as earlier generations had been, by the unbalanced, winner-takes-all dispensation of Stormont.

Both the SDLP and the Alliance Party were founded in 1970 as parties committed to peaceful means and to an honourable accommodation between Nationalists and Unionists. Since then it has been clear that unqualified Unionist majority rule would never bring stability to Northern Ireland. The challenge has been to find a new basis for stability.

As we look at the ideas and options that began to shape themselves at that time, I believe it is relevant to look also at the surrounding circumstances. These were very different than in the era of Gladstone and Parnell.

One obvious change was the end of the European empires.

In the Eurocentric world of the generation before World War One, the standard Unionist argument was that Irish independence, or the abandonment of loyal Unionists, would be the beginning of the dissolution of the Empire with all that that was supposed to mean for civilisation itself.

Nations like the Irish, on the other hand, struggling towards independence and the preservation and full expression of their cultural identity, may, perhaps, have over-accentuated their undoubted distinctiveness, and over-stressed what is expressed in the Irish words, Sinn Féin, meaning 'ourselves alone'.

International affairs are seen very differently today, than in 1914. The new approach creates a new menu of options for solving the age-old problem of division in Ulster.

A collective approach to security, of course a very fragile construct, began to crystallise after the First World War.

After the Second World War, this collective approach was intensified with added urgency. It also came to be appreciated that nation states, if they are to avoid coming into conflict, must deliberately develop and accentuate the interests they have in common. This was reflected in the Charter of the United Nations in the

role given to the UN on economic and social questions. It is reflected most of all by Germany's attempt to subsume German nationalism in a new united European identity. For the sake of harmony in the 21st century, this attempt must succeed and every European state has a responsibility to build unity in Europe.

One of the most impressive aspects of international politics at the end of the 20th century is the recognition that to inhabit common ground, to live and move in the same space, requires that we share common values. A straightforward example is that respect for human rights is now a legitimate subject in international diplomacy.

Among the religious traditions, it is increasingly understood that actions unite, abstractions divide. The Christian traditions, except in pockets here and there, have adopted dialogue as the way forward in relations among themselves and with those of other cultural backgrounds.

The search for common values is in part a response to complexity. The volume of contacts across borders, the mixing of ethnic groups, the pace of scientific research, the trade in money, information, and financial instruments that has overtaken the trade in goods and services; the pressure on resources like oil, water, and air - all of this is likely to elude political authority if politics relies on national measures of control alone.

To produce integrated and cohesive societies, governments need to encourage common values. In particular, we need to find the means of translating personal values which we all still recognise, such as responsibility in relationships and the readiness to share, into a way of life at the level of states, regions, business, and the international community.

The growing interest in the ethics of public affairs has been matched by another phenomenon of the late twentieth century, the constructive involvement of third parties in situations of conflict. Investigation and mediation have been accompanied by aid and investment. It is not surprising, therefore, that the United States, the European Union, and a number of other governments and organisations have in one way or another put their services at the disposal of the Northern Ireland parties.

The technique of "working the common ground", as John Hume puts it, is fundamental and explicit in the European Community, or as we now call it, the European Union.

Europe has always impacted on Irish affairs. At the turn of the 19th century, the Napoleonic Wars brought about the Act of Union. At the turn of the 20th century, the Great War in Europe created the conditions for its repeal in most of Ireland. The European element in the Irish equation is now very different. As the 21st century approaches, the states of Europe have developed new modes of co-operation and mutual accountability - what might be called coalition politics on an international scale - for the simple reason that it promotes peace. This is an opportunity for peace in Ireland.

One of the most famous things ever said about Northern Ireland was said by Winston Churchill after the end of the First World War in a speech to the House of Commons:

“The modes of thought of men, the whole outlook on affairs, the groupings of parties all have encountered violent and tremendous change in the deluge of the world. But as the deluge subsides and the waters fall short, we see the dreary steeples of Fermanagh and Tyrone emerging once more. The integrity of their quarrel is one of the few institutions that has been unaltered in the cataclysm which has swept the world.”

What Churchill was saying in 1921 about a lack of perspective in Northern Ireland was even more obviously true by the 1970s. In the modern era “the modes of thought of men, the whole outlook on affairs” point overwhelmingly to new ways of reconciling differences in Northern Ireland. Will the parties in Northern Ireland adapt themselves to these new perspectives?

The Americans have the concept of a zero-sum game. In a zero sum game, the gains on one side of the ledger equal losses somewhere else. It is impossible for me to win unless you, to the same degree, lose out.

In the middle years of this century, the politics of Northern Ireland seemed to many a zero sum game.

By the 1970s, a more sophisticated approach became possible. It was understood that an honourable accommodation could benefit both Nationalists and Unionists. A settlement could be devised under which neither side would claim victory and neither suffer a defeat.

Another very important change of circumstance as between past generations and the present is the change that has come over the Republic of Ireland.

The country whose government I head can no longer be accused, as we have been in the past, of turning our backs on the world.

We have just completed our fourth Presidency of the European Union. President Robinson is a candidate for the position of UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. Seamus Heaney, U2, Riverdance are Irish-based but outward-looking. Through people of Irish background and through visitors to our own shores we have the closest of links to this country, to the United States, to Australia, to the European continent. As a percentage of GNP, our exports of goods and services are the highest in the OECD with the possible exception of Belgium. I am almost tempted to make the claim of an over-enthusiastic speaker in Joyce's *Ulysses*, that "our galleys furrow the waters of the known globe!"

Nor can it be said that we lag behind economically.

In the period up to 1959, the Irish economy was relatively stagnant. But since the 1960s, and in particular in more recent years, our economy has been changing beyond recognition. Net disposable income per head is now close to the British level and to the European average. In a recent article, one of my Fine Gael predecessors as Taoiseach, Dr. Garret FitzGerald, ventured that the catching up process in the Irish economy has no European parallel since the recoveries of the German, Italian and Greek economies in the aftermath of the last war.

For a number of reasons, including the age structure of our population, our system of education, and a practice of social partnership, there is every prospect that our economy will continue to grow at rates well in excess of the European average.

One of the most important consequences of social and economic change in Ireland has been an evolving attitude towards Northern Ireland. But that is a special subject to which I will return in a few moments.

An account of the improved circumstances for a new approach to Northern Ireland is incomplete without touching on British-Irish relations as a whole.

History has left Britain and Ireland with more in common than any other two sovereign states in Europe or perhaps anywhere in the world.

We share not one but two languages - English and Gaelic. We share the same religious and political traditions. Ireland, like Britain, is a common-law country, although with a written constitution.

That we share the same genetic pool is a minor point compared to the number of Irish families with relatives in Britain, or English, Scottish, or Welsh families who have an Irish relative. We read the same authors, watch the same television programmes, and support many of the same football teams. In rugby, there is both a single all-Ireland team and a joint British-Irish team.

It is obvious that Britain is, and will always remain, Ireland's most important trading partner. What is less widely known is that the volume of trade in the other direction is such that we, although one sixteenth of your population, are now Britain's fifth most important trading partner in the world.

If one considers the rights and obligations of citizenship, Irish citizens in Britain are on something very close to the same footing as British subjects themselves. The same applies to British people living in Ireland. We vote in one another's elections. We can travel and settle down freely in one another's countries. We can take employment in one another's public services.

These British-Irish exchanges are of particular importance for Northern Ireland but they are also important, I believe, for the wider British-Irish relationship. I welcome that under the Ireland Act, 1949, the Republic of Ireland is not a "foreign country" for the purposes of any law enforced in any part of the United Kingdom.

In sum, one of the advantages we have enjoyed in recent decades in working out new approaches for Northern Ireland is the uniqueness of the Anglo-Irish relationship. The intimacy of relationships within these islands makes Northern Ireland qualitatively different to any other divided society in Europe.

Mr President,

I have argued that from the 1970s on, the circumstances have been propitious for a new approach to Northern Ireland. I have suggested that the emergence of new political leadership, in particular within the nationalist community, made change inevitable. I have tried to describe the favourable international background, some of the changes in the Republic of Ireland, and the quality of the wider British-Irish relationships, within which we jointly face the Northern Ireland issue.

That picture, which I believe in its essentials to be true, has been clouded or complicated by the emergence of the provisional IRA, or should I say its re-emergence, at roughly the same time as the SDLP and in direct competition with that democratic political party.

As long as there is a breakdown in trust between the authorities of the state and a section of its people, there is scope for a secret paramilitary organisation to present itself as a line of defence. We have seen that this can happen on the either side of the community in Northern Ireland.

It would be a mistake, however, to accept this as an explanation of the IRA campaign. What the IRA has in fact done is to exploit the uncertain situation in Northern Ireland to pursue what would be seen in modern European thinking, as a maximalist and profoundly archaic objective for a society that is divided in its allegiances. Normal feelings of insecurity have been harnessed to an out-of-date and unrealistic ideology.

The aggressive strategy of terrorism has no mandate from the people of Ireland.

Equally, Irish democracy repudiates the insidious strategy of the Armalite and the ballot box, the combination of violence and of electoral policy. An ideology of forced unity is rejected. It is out of date. It is inhuman. It is alien to the Irish nature.

Mr President,

On the British side, it was an ex-President of the Oxford Union, Sir Edward Heath, who as Prime Minister in 1972 first recognised the scope for a new approach to Northern Ireland.

In the course of 1972, the Heath Government prorogued the parliament at Stormont. It did so mainly because it had come to accept that a Westminster type parliamentary system which in practice resulted in permanent one-party rule in Northern Ireland was no longer tolerable.

Within a few months of taking this step, the British Government produced a Green Paper and then a White Paper outlining the concepts by which it proposed to be guided in its future policy on Northern Ireland.

The approach in those two papers has been progressively codified over the intervening twenty-five years. One thinks, for example, of the Sunningdale Agreement of 1973; the Joint Studies of 1980/81; the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985; the Downing Street Declaration of December 1993; the Framework Document of March 1995; and the launch of political talks in Belfast under international chairmanship in June 1996.

When historians look back on this period, they will notice a remarkable consistency of purpose in British and Irish Government policy from 1972 onwards. Of course there have been concrete developments and changes in thinking between the Heath Government's Green Paper of October 1972 and the Framework Document jointly published by my own Government and the Government of Mr. Major in March 1995. But the key elements in the approach of the two Governments have evolved in a consistent, organic way over the entire period.

The talks process which began last year and resumes on 3 June is the crystallisation, or coming to fruition, of the efforts of a quarter century.

The first of the guiding ideas shared by the British and Irish Governments is that London and Dublin should work together. This co-operative approach was given formal expression in the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985, a Treaty registered at the United Nations. But even before the Anglo-Irish Agreement, and outside the sphere of that agreement, the two Governments have learned to work together.

Why should this be? I believe it has to do with the intimacy within these islands to which I have already referred. We have come to recognise that a settlement in Northern Ireland must have an eye to history, and take into account all the relevant relationships: within Northern Ireland, within the island of Ireland, and between the two islands.

In working together the two Governments seek to provide a moral centre of gravity, an anchor, in a situation where deep divisions produce deep emotions. London and Dublin have more "psychological space" than the parties in Northern Ireland. If between us we can agree on what is fair and feasible, we can restrain the flight from compromise and the multiplication of theories which are so often the consequence of conflict.

A second element of understanding concerns the stance of the British Government. Drawing on what the King, the then Prime Minister, and many others stated at the time of the Anglo-Irish settlement of 1922, the British government has made it clear that its primary interest is to see peace, stability and reconciliation established by agreement among all the people who inhabit the island of Ireland.

A third element of understanding is that the Irish Government, and Irish Nationalists in Northern Ireland, would be ready to work an accommodation falling short of a united Ireland. This key point is often poorly understood by Unionists. It is worth recalling some of the background.

Membership of the European Union has placed our relationship with Britain in a fresh perspective.

Violence in Northern Ireland has forced a reappraisal of the more simplistic assumptions of traditional nationalism.

Essentially the conflict between the unionist and nationalist traditions on the island has come to be seen by many Irish people as a conflict, not between right and wrong, but between two parallel and potentially compatible sets of rights.

A conference of constitutional Nationalist parties on the island of Ireland held in Dublin in 1983 and 1984 under the title "The New Ireland Forum" gave expression to the flexibility that had been developing in Nationalist thinking for over a decade by tabulating a series of preferences. The first preference was indeed a united Ireland, the second a federal or confederal Ireland, the third, joint British-Irish sovereignty in Northern Ireland. But crucially the Forum also allowed that some other alternative to the three preferences might emerge from negotiation. The work of the Forum enabled Garret FitzGerald and Margaret Thatcher to go on to conclude the Anglo-Irish Agreement in which, among other things, the two Governments affirmed that "any change in the status of Northern Ireland would only come about with the consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland". That was a logical progression from earlier thinking.

A conference modelled on the New Ireland Forum, entitled the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation, met in Dublin from 1994 to 1996 with a wider participation than the New Ireland Forum. This time, the participating parties included the Alliance Party and Sinn Fein. The Forum prepared a document entitled "Paths to a Political Settlement: Realities, Principles and Requirements". This document, which was largely but not fully agreed, states that a substantial consensus has developed around the acceptance by the Irish Government that the democratic right of self-determination by the people of Ireland as a whole must be exercised subject to the agreement and consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland. In this, it was simply reflecting an undoubted fact.

Seamus Heaney's career as a poet has spanned the entire period since the Civil Rights campaign of 1968. When he received the Nobel Prize at the end of 1995, his speech touched on his own response to Ireland's political difficulties and gave what I believe is a true reflection of much of the new thinking among those who come from the Nationalist tradition in Ireland :

“The crux of that problem involves an ongoing partition of the island between British and Irish jurisdictions, and an equally persistent partition of the affections in Northern Ireland between the British and Irish heritages; but surely every dweller in the country must hope that the Governments involved in its governance can devise institutions which will allow that partition to become a bit more like the net on a tennis court, a demarcation allowing for agile give-and-take, for encounter and contending, prefiguring a future where the vitality that flowed in the beginning from those bracing words ‘enemy’ and ‘allies’ might finally derive from a less binary and altogether less binding vocabulary.”

In an article in last week’s Irish Times, Prime Minister Blair looked forward to replacing the direct rule of Northern Ireland by Westminster by a new three-stranded agreement. In the parlance of Northern Ireland politics, the three strands refer respectively to political structures within Northern Ireland, the North-South relationship in Ireland, and the British-Irish or East-West relationship.

As to Strand One, the 1972 Green Paper called for “power-sharing” between the representatives of the two main communities or traditions, Unionist and Nationalist.

The 1972 Green Paper also recognised an “Irish dimension” to the governance of Northern Ireland. The Irish dimension, which is subject of Strand Two, was not of course a new idea. A fundamental part of the original 1920-1921 compromise was that the creation of a separate Northern Parliament and the continuing constitutional links between the North and Britain would be paralleled by strong North-South links. What was perhaps new in 1972 and what has survived in our thinking, is that a strong all-Ireland dimension is an important reassurance for Northern Nationalists that the new dispensation we envisage for Northern Ireland will take practical account of their identity.

As well as a North-South dimension, there will be an East-West dimension to a lasting settlement. This will be negotiated in Strand Three. The two Governments look forward to developing an “institutional recognition” of the special links that exist between the peoples of Britain and Ireland.

We are ready to replace the Anglo-Irish Agreement by a new Agreement taking into account what has been agreed under the Three Strands.

The two Governments have also come to appreciate the importance of confidence-building measures, a term borrowed from the international diplomacy of the 1970s.

Dr. Peter North, the outgoing Vice-Chancellor of this University, is the co-author of the Independent Review of Parades and Marches which has broken important new ground in helping us to understand the relationship between parades and marches and the underlying political problems of Northern Ireland. The North Report speaks of the "symbolic nature" of parades, "allowing them to mean different things to different people".

One of the most important confidence-building measures in Northern Ireland in the immediate future will be to ensure that the consensual approach to parades recommended by Dr. North and his colleagues replaces confrontation on the streets. It will be helpful if those involved in dialogue about parades, both Unionists and Nationalists, make more sparing use of the term "rights", which often seems intended to end all discussion, and more generous use of terms such as "interests" and "concerns".

As Dr. Marjorie Mowlam has pointed out, there are many other areas in which confidence-building measures are desirable. The onus to undertake such measures is on political parties and paramilitary organisations as well as on Governments.

I will mention just one area of particular concern, prisons issues. If reconciliation and a new beginning are possible, a sensitivity to the concerns of prisoners will be the proof. For example, it is in keeping with policy throughout these islands to transfer as many prisoners as possible to prisons close to their families.

Mr President,

What I have been describing is a "fund of ideas", built up in a coherent and consistent way by the British and Irish Governments over twenty-five years.

These ideas are still opposed in some quarters, by republicans who want only a unitary Irish State and by harder line Unionists who adopt an inverse territorial agenda in United Kingdom terms.

These groups have more in common than they appreciate. Both rely on absolute notions of sovereignty devised at the Peace of Westphalia in the 17th century and by Blackstone in the 18th century, in the service of long past political interests of

that time. Neither dogmatic unionists nor dogmatic republicans are in touch with the more hopeful developments of the 20th century.

In the politics of today, it is a safe rule of thumb that those who advocate brusque and simple solutions place a discount on the convictions of others. It is also a rule of thumb that the simpler the solution proposed, the more ready is the proposer to rely ultimately on force.

But the politics of accommodation, and of learning to live with complexity, have become the hallmark of maturity in public life. I have already spoken of the United Nations and the European Union. I could as easily have mentioned the imaginative and equitable constitutional models promoted by Britain in Canada, Australia and South Africa, or the skills in coalition-building that we have learned in Irish politics.

The three-stranded approach in Northern Ireland goes with the grain of history. Fundamentalism is an unsignposted road to disaster.

Mr President,

The two Governments and the parties in Northern Ireland are, as I said at the outset, now face-to-face with an opportunity, unparalleled in our history, to put behind us the troubles of centuries.

Gladstone's vision of the 1880s, a courageous effort against the background of Empire to base relationships within these islands on friendship and understanding, led to the settlement of 1922, with its residue of difficulty.

From the 1970s onwards, against the background of common British and Irish membership of the European Union, a new spirit in faith and in politics, and a economic renaissance in Ireland, we have developed a fund of shared ideas from which to negotiate a comprehensive settlement. The work of a whole generation is coming to its ripening now.

The public mood is overwhelmingly for peace.

Mr President,

Your invitation to me this evening, and the interest of the Oxford Union in Ireland through successive generations, speaks to me of something profound in British-Irish relations and in politics as a whole.

There is another dimension to politics. I am referring to the ability to forgive.

In the course of a recent interview for the Daily Telegraph, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Dr. Mowlam said about some of her personal experiences, "I have learnt to have a short memory when it comes to anger and shame". What hope is there in the Middle East, or among the formerly warring nation states of Europe, or for Africa, or for any one of us if this insight is not brought to bear? If we fail to join Dr. Mowlam in training that short memory?

In his speech to the House of Commons which I have already quoted, Churchill referred to "the power which Ireland has, both Nationalist and Orange, to lay its hands upon the vital strings of British life and politics." It is in the relationship with Ireland - and for those of us in politics in Dublin, in the relationship with the parties in Northern Ireland and with Britain - that we come unavoidably into contact with problems that can only be resolved in the light of unseen values, unseen values which are yet the most important values of all.

In 1825, the Oxford Union debated Ireland for the first time. The motion that the Act of Union was not beneficial to Ireland was carried by a narrow margin.

Thus began an unbroken interest of this Union in Ireland over the best part of two centuries.

As recently as January, the Oxford Union staged a Northern Ireland Forum bringing together among others, the then Secretary of State Patrick Mayhew, John Hume, and David Trimble. By choosing a non-adversarial format, the Union reflected in its own way the seriousness of purpose which political parties have demonstrated by observing bipartisanship on Northern Ireland.

The time has come to answer what so many speakers in this Chamber have known as the question of Ireland.

In this generation, and in advance of the 21st century, we can transform our differences into bonds of understanding within these islands and into a sign of hope for others all over the world whose lives are disrupted by an unwelcome legacy from the past.

END.