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**SPEECH BY THE TAOISEACH MR. BERTIE AHERN TD AT THE
LAUNCH OF THE FIANNA FAIL PEACE REFERENDUM
CAMPAIGN, BURLINGTON HOTEL, FRIDAY 1 MAY AT 12.00 NOON.**

The overwhelming majority of people in this State want to see a lasting peace in Northern Ireland. We have all been horrified by the violence of the last 30 years. We have long worked for and have now finally achieved a reasonable, balanced and comprehensive agreement that is worthy of the support of both Unionists and Nationalists and of everyone North and South. Even if the Agreement is not all we would like, even if it contains things that we may not be particularly happy about, we have to make an overall judgement. I recommend it as a basis for peace, as a basis for political progress, and as an Agreement that is fair to all.

It is very important that there should be a high 'Yes' vote not just amongst those who vote but amongst the electorate as a whole. Let us show that we really care, that we do not want to see anyone else killed, any more families bereaved, by turning out to vote. Ideally, everyone should study for themselves the details of the Agreement and form their own judgement, but also be guided by the unanimous support for the Agreement amongst all parties in the Dáil, and the unanimous support, even with some reserves, for the Agreement amongst all parties at the conclusion of the Talks.

If ever there was a case of an important civic duty, it is on 22 May, to give an overwhelming popular endorsement to the Good Friday Peace Agreement reached in Belfast. Let us demonstrate that we are serious about peace, serious about justice and serious about wanting political accommodation.

Fianna Fáil will conduct an active and vigorous referendum campaign, of which this is just the beginning. Posters are being put up, as I speak. Literature has been prepared and is being distributed. I and my colleagues will be touring the country.

The institutions being established by the Agreement are all about enabling people to work together for the common good. All key decisions in the Assembly will be taken by parallel consent, in other words they need substantial support in both communities. There will be inclusive partnership between Unionists and Nationalists in the Executive on a proportionate basis. There will be a Civic Forum for the social partners to make their contribution. North and South will work together on the implementing bodies and on cooperation in the North-South Ministerial Council. There will also be increased contact across the Irish Sea. It is all about building trust and

cooperation, and managing constructively the political differences that remain.

The Agreement also provides a basis for establishing equality, for developing the use of the Irish language, where there is a demand for it, for police reform, and for reintegrating prisoners caught up in the conflict back into society.

Of course, agreeing principles are only the first stage. The next stage is to implement them and make them a reality and to ensure the entire Agreement works harmoniously. Consensus will not always be easy to arrive at. But people on all sides now realise that there is no alternative to working together. We can no longer turn our backs on each other or try to ignore the other tradition. The consensus-building will include in principle parties that have never worked together before, as clearly envisaged in the Agreement, assuming those parties are willing to take the Pledge of Office and abide by the Code of Conduct. The most important principle to be adhered to is the commitment to non-violence and exclusively peaceful and democratic means. That signifies that parties associated with paramilitary organisations who want to hold executive office have the responsibility to ensure that the guns remain silent and out of commission, and that the ceasefires do in fact represent a total and definitive ending of violence. There can obviously be no changing of the terms of the Agreement unilaterally or bilaterally by either Government or any

party, or the erection of new or old preconditions. But those who demand good faith from others need to show it themselves.

Balanced constitutional change is really agreement about how in the future we resolve fundamental differences that have cost thousands of lives. Force or domination simply does not work. Neither tradition and neither Government can unilaterally lay down the law. The principle of consent is paramount. For the sake of peace, we here in the South have to be prepared to move, to make our contribution. Without our willingness to contemplate balanced constitutional change as part of an overall Agreement, there would have been no negotiations, no Agreement and in all probability there would be no peace. I believe we can gain more from greater solidarity between people North and South, and from the establishment of actual all-island structures for cooperation. There will be a peace dividend for everyone from increased stability on the island, which will become more attractive for investment, trade and tourism. There is also an immense psychological gain, in defining our nation in generous and inclusive 32-county terms, and by putting people before territory. We realise now more than ever that if we want to deepen all-island cooperation we can only do it by winning the trust of the different parties and communities in Northern Ireland.

The solution of problems must be arrived at by discussion and negotiation, and by exploring all the options, till a consensus can be reached. It will be in the interests of the people of Northern Ireland and of Ireland as a whole that the Agreement works. Northern Ireland, like everywhere else, needs an efficient, expeditious and fair system of government, if it is to prosper and compete.

Our referendum campaign is directed at the entire electorate, and we acknowledge the important and valuable contribution to the peace process by all the parties who have been involved in it, including both our partners and predecessors in Government and the British Government. The long established constitutional parties in Northern Ireland like the SDLP and Alliance and the Ulster Unionist Party have reason to be well pleased, that they have now been joined by both the Loyalists and Sinn Féin who are also to be congratulated.

This is also a defining moment for Fianna Fáil, that has been the standard-bearer of democratic Republicanism in this jurisdiction for over 70 years. It should be noted that we asked our members to amend our own party's constitution two years ago, before we asked the people to amend the country's Constitution. As I said at Arbour Hill, the new articles, in my view, represent

noble ideals, worthy of support, that echo the ideals of the United Irishmen and of Young Ireland, whose bicentenary and 150th anniversary respectively we celebrate this year. It is part of removing the strong mutual antagonism from political life on this island, and replacing it by more cooperation and working together as well as creating more room and respect for difference.

Those who might be tempted to vote 'No', because of unhappiness about this or that aspect, or for legitimate and conscientious reasons that we might all respect, even if we do not agree with them, should, before they finally decide how to vote, look at the impact of the Agreement as whole, and consider whether any real alternative exists.

Has the politics of sectarianism anything to offer the people of this island ?

Has not the sectarian warmongering been responsible for some of the tragedy of the last 30 years, pitting Protestants against Catholics and vice versa ? There is another intolerant brand of opposition, coming from those who want to ignore the Irishness of the Nationalist community completely and deny them any communal rights or political identity, by simply integrating Northern Ireland into Britain. The flaw in that argument is that Britain is going in the

opposite direction, dismantling the integration of centuries, and creating devolved parliaments in Scotland and Wales, as well as in Northern Ireland.

Then on the other side we have certain Republican fundamentalists, who basically want to maintain the right or the option to carry on the armed struggle. They cite in their justification a declaration that is 80 years old that provides no answers to the problems of the North that that period conspicuously failed to solve. The memory of the best known of the hunger strikers is invoked. But no one can presume that he would have been opposed to the peace initiatives of his fellow leaders in the Republican Movement. Fundamentalism is sterile, and leads nowhere except to more pointless grief. It has no significant support among Irish people at home or abroad. All it does is to divide and weaken the influence and impact of the cause which it claims to defend. More sacrifice now will not justify past sacrifice. Continued paramilitary activity only serves to retard the process of demilitarisation and normalisation which we all wish to see, and is against the best interests of the entire Nationalist and Republican community. Why should anyone really want to see Ireland retreat backwards into a renewed and sordid conflict that offers no hope of a positive outcome? Ireland needs something that works better and that is worthy of high patriotic ideals.

There is everything to gain from peaceful politics, where legitimate political goals cannot be discredited by any undemocratic methods used to try and achieve them. We look forward to an unarmed civil society in Northern Ireland that resolves peacefully and by inclusive dialogue its political and intercommunal problems. This Agreement is a foundation for that type of society. All armed groups have a positive part to play in creating it. In Germany the Red Army Faction, which was responsible for a number of high profile acts of terrorism, has recently disbanded.

Paramilitary organisations here would do a great service for their country, and would create a surge of confidence in the future, if they too were to accept that with the implementation of this Agreement the war is over and with that their own role, and to make that clear.

The Agreement commits the British Government to the normalisation of security arrangements and practices and the removal of security installations as early as possible, consistent with the level of threat. While conscious of the need for continuing security to counter threats posed by those paramilitary organisations that remain active, it is unfortunate that the people of South

Armagh, nearly twelve months into a ceasefire, should be still treated, as if they were living in occupied territory. We for our part have showed ourselves prepared to modify a territorial mindset that has contributed to conflict. It is reasonable to expect that the British Army also give up its territorial mindset. The landscape of South Armagh has a frequency of watchtowers reminiscent of the former Iron Curtain which are anything but a normal feature of the countryside.

The local population have complained to me of the unacceptable level of harassment which is contributing nothing to support for the peace process in that area. I cannot understand why the period of peace should be used to add to or extend to installations that have to be dismantled, if the terms of the Belfast Agreement are to be fulfilled.

Those who feel strongly about these and other issues should understand that the Agreement contains important commitments, which we will now be able to pursue with much greater chance of success.

The Agreement represents a huge agenda for progress of fundamental change in the years ahead, including common institutions in which to pursue shared

objectives and interests. It was Senator Mitchell in his first report who observed that concentration on differences had 'obscured the widespread agreement that exists' and that 'in fact, members of both traditions, have far more in common than they believe'. He also said that 'no one should underestimate the value of the consensus for peace'. How right he has proved.

22 May will be a momentous milestone in our history, and it will represent in international law a valid act of national self-determination, the first since 1918, even though it will be conducted concurrently. That act need not and does not preclude a further act of national self-determination at a future date.

For the sake of peace, and so that no one can mistake or misinterpret the voice of the Irish people, or claim that a majority are in fact only a minority, I call for a clear and emphatic 'Yes' vote for the peace agreement in the Referendum. I would urge everyone who is physically able to make it their duty to come out and vote. It is not so much the result itself but the strength of the result that will count.

DECOMMISSIONING

We have always stated that the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons is an essential part of any settlement. If the Agreement is to work, and if all parties are to participate, then weapons have to be out of use and out of commission for good. How weapons are got out of the way or put to bed is a matter for discussion. But the Agreement is very clear. Anyone taking part in the Executive has to pledge 'a commitment to non-violence and exclusively peaceful and democratic means' and this obviously would not be compatible with armed groups remaining active. Sinn Féin and the Loyalists have signed up to 'a commitment to the total disarmament of all paramilitary organisations' and have promised to use any influence they have to achieve this within two years.

We do not want decommissioning to become an obstacle to the operation of the Agreement and the achievement of peace, but equally it is not an issue that is going to go away. There has to be good faith on all sides. There has to be a clear signal given by armed groups that with a settlement in place they are going to wind up their activities. Otherwise, they will make life very difficult for the political parties that represent them.