



National Committee on American Foreign Policy

Where Leaders Meet

Northern Ireland Peace Initiative

Transcript of a Speech by Peter Robinson, MP

April 5, 2006

Mr Chairman, thank you for today's invitation and for your welcome. I am delighted to be here and to have the opportunity to meet and address you all.

Several years ago, when I was here in New York speaking to the Council on Foreign Relations about the Northern Ireland conflict, the very first question from a member of the audience indicated that he was surprised to hear what I had to say as he thought the Northern Ireland problem had already been sorted out. Unfortunately it was not, and is not.

My immediate reaction was to regard the questioner's assumption as the understandable view of someone who is not acquainted with daily events in the province which can only be seen and understood by someone close up and personally involved. Later, when I reflected on the matter, I had to acknowledge, at least to myself, that those of us who see it up close also miss an important dimension and often fail to appreciate the scale of progress which has been made.

I not only acknowledge that progress has been made but, you will not be surprised to hear, I am even prepared to let my party take credit for significant elements of it.

However, it would be premature to consider the problem resolved. Much progress has been made but there is still much to do.

With the attention of people in the United States focussed on Iraq, Iran, domestic terrorism and the Middle East it is no surprise that Northern Ireland is off the radar screen in terms of news coverage and analysis. Indeed I would have to confess it has fallen well down the agenda in the UK too. Yet while world attention has moved on, the critical work of bringing finality to the conflict in Northern Ireland is still being pursued and, I believe, has now reached a decisive moment.

I am however pleased to find that under the radar there is still an abiding US interest in Northern Ireland issues as demonstrated by your presence today. My friend, Bill Flynn, (I hope that does no damage to him) has consistently kept his finger on the pulse of Northern Ireland politics. Bill and I come from very different backgrounds but I believe we both share a fond desire to see a durable peace and an ambition to see politics in the province work and bring a discernable improvement to the lives and livelihoods of nationalist and unionist alike. I believe we might find we agree, more than either of us would feel comfortable with, on how those objectives can be achieved. I trust he will stick to his mission as I will to mine and I hope we will both finish the course and achieve our shared goal.

As far as US Administrations are concerned while the Clinton White House helped and nudged Sinn Fein into the political process, there is a discernibly firmer stance from this Administration. I believe



that timely change of emphasis is helping to push the republican movement towards ending its campaign. The notion of the Provisional IRA launching a major terrorist attack today, in light of the current Administration's attitude to terrorism, is hard to contemplate.

Much of the commentary on Northern Ireland has been superficial in nature and I might say often unbalanced. There are even those who have sought to use it as an example of how such problems can be resolved elsewhere. I think that approach is somewhat rash considering the problem is not yet solved. Only after *completion* are the real lessons likely to emerge.

It reminds me of the story about when the Chinese leader, Zhou Enlai, was asked what he thought was the significance of the French Revolution, he replied, "*It's too soon to tell.*"

If nearly two centuries did not afford sufficient hindsight to pass judgment on the French Revolution, it would be exceedingly impulsive to suggest that lessons can be learned from Northern Ireland before we even exit the tunnel.

While the issue of Northern Ireland as a whole is receding from the international spotlight I think it is fair to say that the unionist position has never really been widely understood in the United States. Today, I would like to give you a unionist perspective on the peace process thus far and the prospects for the future. I want also to touch on a few of the real emerging lessons which can be learned from our experience.

Firstly let me apply some context. Everyone can settle - I will not go back to 940 AD and the birth of Brian Boru. Indeed, I will not even start at 1690 and the glorious victory of King William at the battle of the Boyne. Mind you there will be those who will consider that I have missed a great opportunity by not doing that.

While historically the Northern Ireland issue has been seen as a conflict over territory, religion, culture and identity the core issue today is much simpler - it's about the rule of law.

It may surprise some but I believe there is no insurmountable problem for politicians in Northern Ireland to forge a working relationship based on respect for each others values - indeed they are standing ready to do so - where the problem lies is that it is vital such an arrangement is earthed in preserving democracy and the rule of law. These precious principles must prevail and must not be sacrificed in a rush for the finish line.

To better understand my party's position and intent let me give you all a glimpse of the final hours of the failed 2004 negotiations as I witnessed them. If you had suggested ten or twenty years ago that an agreement could be reached that both Ian Paisley's DUP and Sinn Fein/IRA could endorse it would have been thought ludicrous and absurd. Indeed, the men in white coats would have carried you away - but fifteen months ago it *almost* happened.

In the months which led up to December we worked painstakingly and constantly particularly with the British government but also with the Irish government. By the time the first draft of a deal was committed to paper we had some 120 issues in it which needed addressed. As the weeks passed we worked through draft after draft until by December we were approaching closure.

With only four outstanding issues the DUP team's judgement, based on what the government was telling us, was that a deal was potentially only days away. It was felt we needed to communicate a sense of where we were to the unionist community in preparation for a possible outcome.

Dr Paisley went to Downing Street for a private meeting with the PM and on leaving he addressed the media. In truth he was addressing his own supporters back home. He uttered words which were as historic as they were sincere. He said he might have to swallow hard and even bite his lip but if



republicans were to end their campaign he was prepared to work with them in government. That night I took a team into Downing Street to discuss the four outstanding issues. Within hours, agreement was reached with the government on how they would be handled.

One of the four outstanding subjects related to the government agreeing to proposals to build confidence in the unionist community by taking agreed steps involving fairness and equality. The next morning I received a letter from the Secretary of State committing the government to take the necessary steps. There were now only three remaining issues.

Within the hour a further letter from the Prime Minister to Dr Paisley gave the required assurance on a matter relating to the security forces. There were only two remaining issues. Thirty minutes later I received a telephone call to confirm that the Secretary of State had made progress with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on a financial package for Northern Ireland which we considered essential to give a new executive the ability to make early progress. Written confirmation would be with us immediately after lunch.

One issue remained. It was the problem of decommissioning. We were told that Dublin and the General deChastelain were dealing with this issue directly with Sinn Fein. I note that since the breakdown Sinn Fein has said they had always insisted to the two governments that they could not deliver the transparency we required. However, in our discussions with the government the two outstanding decommissioning elements were firstly, not whether there would be photographs of decommissioning but whether they would be published in December or March. Secondly we needed to be satisfied that the independent witnesses would be free to report what they had seen without any restrictions.

I had barely reported to Dr Paisley on the progress with the financial package when a call from Downing Street brought disturbing news. The government had learned that Gerry Adams had organised a major press conference later in the afternoon. That was disturbing as none of us knew what it was about. Calling an unexpected press conference at this final stage of delicate negotiations before matters had been concluded could only be bad news. As we waited to listen to the press conference on television we already sensed he was exiting the negotiations and rushing to get his retaliation in first. We were right.

I do not relate that account to score a point in the blame game - there would be no value in that. I do it to show just how close we were fifteen months ago to reaching agreement and to show also that we were ready to do business with Sinn Fein if they delivered on the elements outlined in the proposals for a Comprehensive Agreement, namely complete and transparent decommissioning, a total end to all IRA organised and sanctioned crime and the absolute termination of the terror campaign.

Most commentators expressed disappointment at the collapse but many reasoned that having come so close another push in the New Year would get us over the line. However, two events were to set the process back on its heels and cast doubt on the intention of the republican movement or, at least, cast doubt on their ability to handle the transition.

The murder of Robert McCartney and the IRA's robbery of £26.5 million from the Northern Bank demonstrated that they were still involved in the worst of both paramilitary and criminal activity and when it became known that the organisation of the bank heist was being carried out at the very same time as Sinn Fein was involved in negotiations for the Comprehensive Agreement you can imagine what view my colleagues took of the republican movement's integrity and credibility.



The bad faith behaviour of Sinn Fein shattered the fond but fragile hope anyone had that republicans were ready to leave violence and crime behind. To that extent when some months later the IRA made its July statement and then substantially decommissioned it only served to lessen the despair at events, whereas without the murder and robbery the July statement and the act of decommissioning could have been regarded as important confidence builders.

As a result of the IRA's duplicity, unionists, not unnaturally, are looking for a greater degree of certainty that the IRA has ended its illegal activities completely and permanently. Given our experiences we will not be rushed into judgement.

Republican paramilitary and criminal activity still continues though not at anything like previous levels. That they continue to be involved in illegal activity is not simply a DUP judgement. The two governments set up an independent body to monitor the behaviour of all the paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland. The monitoring body - the IMC - in its latest reports specify that the IRA is still engaged in intelligence gathering and infiltrating public and other institutions. Moreover they particularly note this is an activity sanctioned by the leadership.

On criminality they say the IRA continues to be *"heavily involved in serious organised crime, including counterfeiting and the smuggling of fuel and tobacco."*

The IRA must be pushed to divest itself entirely of its remaining illegal activities. I contend this is the crucial obstacle which must be removed.

Standing back one can see appreciable progress has been made but in truth their clean-up has been slower than the circumstances require. It has also been staggered and at times regressive. So however far down the transition road we each may judge their progress, they are still positioned short of completion and they have some way to go to convey permanence. It is as if they are testing us all. As if they want to taper it down incrementally and see at what level of wrongdoing we are all prepared to tolerate.

Mr Chairman, I am a committed devolutionist. I want politicians in Northern Ireland rather than English, Scottish or Welsh Ministers to be taking the decisions which impact on the lives of our people - and I want it to happen as soon as possible. But there is one certainty. If we rush to accept Sinn Fein into government while they remain involved in terror and crime we will for years to come be living with what will then be regarded by them as an acceptable level of illegality. So we want to be sure of completion and permanence. But let me also make it clear that our insistence on completion and permanence does not lessen our desire to see progress. It is just that we are not the party that can control when the conditions are met. It is merely for us to acknowledge when it happens.

Everybody has the same choice - are they prepared to tolerate enduring organised crime or will they hold out until republicans end it.

The present focus of debate is not about whether there should be a single party Government in Northern Ireland or some form of coalition. Virtually everyone in Northern Ireland now accepts that to have sufficient stability, credibility and authority in the divided society which presently exists, government in Northern Ireland needs to enjoy the support of both unionists and nationalists. The real debate is therefore over the nature of these arrangements and the basis upon which parties can participate in Government.

Our position is that only parties which are committed to exclusively peaceful and democratic means are eligible for Government. I do not believe that in any normal society this could be considered a radical proposal. I am quite sure that the United States would not entertain in government, at any



level, those who are involved in terrorism, yet there were, and perhaps still are, some who believe that in order to make progress; those who remain associated with terrorism should be permitted into Government even though the IRA has not wound up its operations.

The argument they advanced was that terrorists when in Government could be weaned off terrorism. If there were ever any doubts as to the folly of this position the events of the last ten years should have removed them. Rather than conform to democratic norms the IRA took its positions on the Executive and continued with most of its activities unhindered.

That is why even during the period from 1999 the IRA was in Colombia training the FARC narco-terrorists and helping them develop car bombing techniques. They ran in guns from Florida. They raided the Police Special Branch Headquarters in Belfast. Murders, beatings and other criminal activities also continued while their representatives sat in office.

History has proven that it did not work. Instead, they traded some of their guns for concessions. In fact if we were waiting for that process to end, the IRA would probably still be in swapping guns for concessions decades from now.

The view held by my party, which was supported by the unionist community, is one of zero tolerance. The rules are simple - if people want into the club, they have to pay the membership; and the membership requires them to be exclusively committed to peaceful and democratic means. That has to be done up-front, beforehand; it is not something that might be done along the way, nor can it be something that people might eventually come to terms with.

I believe that our approach is working. The fact there has been substantial decommissioning and progress is being made on ending the IRA's other activities signals we are adopting the right approach. It would not have happened otherwise.

Let me comment on a related topic. I must commend those U.S. politicians and also those respected non-elected Irish/American figures who sought not only to highlight the plight of the McCartney family and the IRA's responsibility for his murder but who also tangibly expressed their displeasure.

Their intervention was most effective. It illustrates that pressure coming from this side of the Atlantic can aid in the effort to democratise Sinn Fein. I am pleased about that. Indeed, over the last few days I have been asking those same people - people who have shown they can sway Sinn Fein and the IRA - to use their influence to push the Republican Movement to complete the transition to democracy.

Their persuasive role over future months could be critical in the necessary conditions being in place when the government's deadline falls. I am sure most of you are aware that on Thursday Mr Blair and Mr Ahern are travelling to Belfast to announce an initiative to set up an Assembly which will be time-limited.

I do not make the point lightly about Americans using their proven persuasive powers. You see, most unionists will say - given the length of time it has taken to get republicans to where they are today - that they will not have reached the stage of completion by ended its paramilitary and criminal activity and convincing the community of its permanence by the date of 24th November which the government has set as a deadline for setting up an executive.

I fear they are right. If republicans maintain the present rate of change they will miss that deadline. But, I believe the leadership of the republican movement has the power and capacity, if it chooses to exercise it, to increase the pace of its transition. The question is, "Will they apply their authority?"



Some people say the DUP will be under massive pressure come November. That is not the case. The deadline is for republicans to meet not the DUP.

Back in December 2004, instead of using the time to democratise, they engaged in robbing the Northern Bank and other illegal activity. What will they do with this opportunity? Are they up for it?

What is sure is that Sinn Fein will not meet the government's deadline if they continue whinging about the two governments following a DUP agenda or attacking the IMC because they report on IRA misbehaviour. Sinn Fein will not do what is necessary if it remains in denial.

Let me be clear. Without an appreciable acceleration of the pace of standing down their paramilitary organisation and ending criminality the government's deadline will not be met. A new urgency must be injected into the process or the community as a whole will lose a valuable opportunity.

We must ensure government is the preserve of those who cherish peace, liberty and democracy and are exclusively committed to use only those values. These ideals are too important to be risked by being rushed. We have not lived through more than thirty years of violence and terrorism to make the mistake of squandering the opportunity which exists to end it once and for all.

There are people here who can help in urging republicans to quicken the tempo of the transition. Northern Ireland will owe you a debt of gratitude if you convince Sinn Fein of that need.

I am sometimes told that there is a corresponding requirement for unionists to show they would treat a democratised Sinn Fein in the same way that they treat other parties within the democratic process and that unionists must demonstrate that in those circumstances Sinn Fein would be entitled to all the democratic rights, benefits and advantages that being a democratic party with a democratic mandate allows.

If Sinn Fein operate in an exclusively peaceful and democratic mode unionists will place no impediments in the way of them exercising all the rights every other democratic party enjoys. Both unionist parties have consistently stated that they would do business with Sinn Fein if it were entirely free of its paramilitary and criminal associations. It is for Sinn Fein to shake off the cords that bind it to terror and criminality.

Of course they will still be our political opponents in relation to constitutional and many other matters. As Mr Adams said fifteen months ago "It will be a battle a day." And as most of you will have heard, Ian Paisley when in battle does not pull his punches, but at least in that battle the scars will be political.

The question is not "Will the DUP work with Sinn Fein if it operates by exclusively democratic and peaceful means?" the question is whether Sinn Fein can attain that status.

There were many who believed when the DUP became the largest political party in Northern Ireland that it would spell the end of political progress and the commencement of the journey towards Armageddon. I am happy to report that the heavens have not fallen. I believe the election of the DUP as the largest political party has provided greater stability within unionism, the party has managed to fashion circumstances which provide more balance from governmental measures and we have adopted a course which will substantially increase the likelihood of securing a lasting resolution to our problems.



For too long difficult decisions have been either ignored or fudged. Short term political expediency triumphed over long term solutions. As a result republicans always knew that they had only to make minor moves - or create the illusion of making minor moves - to allow the process to continue.

In order to bring closure to matters, the situation could no longer be allowed to drift. Half measures and temporary fudges had been used to ensure that breakdown was avoided. But rather than bringing about a solution these steps merely put off the day when republicans confronted the issues of decommissioning, paramilitary activity and criminality.

This is an important but difficult lesson to learn in any conflict. Short term fixes are no substitute for long term progress.

If we were to succumb to the view that we should form an Executive now it would once again create a recipe for instability and would be no more sustainable than on previous occasions. People must be convinced the bad old days are over; that the gun has gone; that government can operate without suspensions and crises caused by illegal activities.

It was for this reason we suggested getting the Assembly up and running at a non-executive level. This would give the Sinn Fein leadership time to deal conclusively with paramilitarism and criminality. Parties would be working together within that structure allowing trust and confidence to grow.

We have been flexible on the nature of the entry level of devolution and open to consider proposals for its final form as well. Moreover, we have insisted the transitional Assembly should not last a moment beyond the point when the standards have been met for full executive devolution to be launched.

However, I stress, we are resolved that the political institutions be paramilitary-proofed and free of contamination from crime.

I have concentrated today on republican rather than loyalist activity not because there is any moral distinction to be made between the two, but because only Sinn Fein has the electoral strength to be in Government. But just in case there is thought to be any ambiguity let me make it crystal clear that all illegal activity from whatever quarter must come to an end. That is my unqualified message to loyalist paramilitary groups.

Finally, on a personal note, so that you might better understand what motivates me, my call into politics came as a result of the murder of a school friend. His name was Harry Beggs; he was the innocent victim of an IRA bombing. They placed a bomb at the exit from the offices in which he worked in the Electricity Service. The bomb detonated as he left the building. The blast ushered Harry into eternity. I determined that I would do all in my power to resist the terrorists who had murdered him. Democracy must be the victor.

Harry was just one of thousands of victims of the troubles. Many more people I have known have also been victims. I have seen men draw their last breath. I have followed their funerals and tried to comfort their families. They have come from every tradition, from every location, from every age profile, class and gender and they have come from every political and faith background. At its height over 470 people were killed in one year - that's the equivalent to 100,000 people in the US being killed in just twelve months. Can you imagine how that experience would have shaped people's thinking and behaviour? In Ulster there have been few homes - Catholic or Protestant - not touched by death or mutilation.



I acknowledge the murder of Harry Beggs made me angry, left me wanting retribution and very bitter. Over the years, as the grey hairs formed, I have observed from life that bitterness *consumes the vessel that contains it* and I am resolved that the troubled times I have lived through should end in my day and that my children will see peace.

I cannot see into the future, still less can I control it, but I can invest in it. In the months ahead I hope there will emerge a clear message from Northern Ireland that all those who have *stood fast and suffered long* have been rewarded by the dawn of a better and brighter day; that the eternal values of liberty and democracy have prevailed and that the sons and daughters of the Planter and the Gael have found a way to share the land of their birth and live together in peace.

