

SP
PB
AC

STATEMENT BY THE TAOISEACH, MR. JOHN BRUDON, T.D.

ON MONDAY 5TH MAY, 1997 ON HIS FORTHCOMING VISIT

TO BRITAIN

CC NI Perm Secs

Zandhaug
6/5/97

I am visiting Britain this week to meet the new Prime Minister, Tony Blair, to meet representatives of the Irish Community in Britain, to promote trade, and to address the Oxford Union.

My meeting with the Prime Minister is particularly important, as it is my first with Tony Blair as Prime Minister. I am very much looking forward to it, as I believe we can develop many new possibilities for cooperation in regard to Northern Ireland, bilaterally and within Europe. Work in each of these areas is mutually reinforcing. During my visit, I will focus particularly, as I will explain later, on the position of the Irish in Britain.

There are many positive areas where structured cooperation between the two Governments can meet vital needs, and where we can use existing East/West institutions more fully.

The most exciting area of all for potential cooperation is in Education.

Educational improvement in Ireland is my own personal priority. This is one of the reasons why I launched the Information Society proposals, which commit the Government here to a major investment in training teachers in information technology, and in giving every child full familiarity with the potential of the information super highway for educational purposes, for work, and for life.

This investment can be made most cost-effective if there are elements of compatibility with what is being done in Britain and elsewhere. The new British Government, plans to "wire up schools, libraries, colleges and hospitals to the information super highway". They plan a National Grid for Learning, franchised as a public/private partnership, which will help teachers update their skills. They also plan a new University for Industry, collaborating with the Open University to bring new opportunities to adults seeking to develop their potential.

The Irish education's curriculum is, and will always remain, quite distinctive from that in Britain. But these new developments open up huge opportunities for savings on educational hardware and software investments, for cooperation on particular courses and subjects, and for enhancing mutual understanding

through education both between Ireland and Britain, and within Ireland itself, North and South. I look forward to discussing these possibilities with Tony Blair. Specifically, I would like Ireland to have inputs to, and benefits from, both the proposed new National Grid for Learning, and the new University for Industry.

I welcome the new British Government's commitment to sign the E.U. Social Charter, and agree with them that the Social Charter allows European countries, working together, to promote employability and flexibility, not high social costs. Neither Ireland, nor Britain, should attempt to compete as low wage economies, with countries paying a tenth or a hundredth of our wage levels.

Therefore we must each of us work to enhance the skill and added-value potential of our work forces. The Irish Government will be publishing very soon, a comprehensive White Paper on Human Resources. It will detail the measures we plan to encourage employers and employees to invest more of their own money in training, and to ensure that training qualifications are mutually and internationally recognised. As Ireland and Britain are, in effect, part of the same labour market, investment in employee training in Britain

benefits Ireland, and vice versa. The two Governments should consciously work together on an agreed plan to maximise these benefits.

Organised crime represents a threat to society in Ireland and Britain, and there is a common travel area between the two islands. On the continent of Europe a similar common travel area exists, under the Schengen Accord, and it is being accompanied by an immensely detailed system of cooperation on anti-crime measures. Neither Ireland nor Britain are part of this accord as yet, so we need to develop our own, equally effective measures against crime, in parallel and conjunction with what is happening on the continent.

One of the issues that the new British Government has committed itself to tackle is that of homelessness. Structures exist for East/West cooperation between the two Governments, and I would particularly like to develop joint initiatives between us within these structures to deal with the plight of Irish people who are homeless in Britain, and who represent a disproportionate share of all the homeless in Britain. Many of them are young Irish people, who have been living rough on the streets. The two Governments can work together, in a structured way, in both Ireland and Britain, to deal with the causes, and the symptoms, of the homelessness problem.

There is another area in which Ireland and Britain are, in effect, part of the one market - food production and food distribution. The Irish Government has already set up an independent Food Safety Authority, and is well advanced with legislation to give it statutory teeth. The new British Government has said that it too will now set up an "independent food standards agency". As food products go in both directions between the two jurisdictions, a practical base of cooperation must be established, ab initio, between the two new national agencies for food safety. This will maximise consumer protection and ensure that markets stay open to quality producers, wherever they are.

Environmental issues have, in the past, been controversial between Ireland and Britain - particularly in reference to nuclear power. While I do not believe that we will quickly reach a complete identity of views on these issues, I welcome the fact that the new British Government is committed to "push environmental concerns higher up the international agenda", and "strengthen cooperation in the European Union on environmental issues". This positive approach will make it much easier to work out solutions to problems like Sellafield, and will also help us work together on cleaning up the Irish Sea and combating global warming.

The Irish and British Governments are both committed to managing economic policies on the basis of social partnership, partnership which recognises rights and obligations. I believe that this shared general partnership approach to policy will help us in dealing with European issues and with Northern Ireland.

Cooperation in relation to Northern Ireland should, I believe, have the utmost priority for both Governments.

I welcome the statements by the new Secretary of State for Northern Ireland which emphasise that future arrangements for the Government of Northern Ireland should attract the support of all parts of the community. This is an important recognition of the need for Nationalist, as well as Unionist, consent. It emphasises the central task of the talks process which we commenced on 10th June last year, and which resumes on 3rd June.

I also welcome her commitment to ease tensions arising from parades and marches and to uphold the rule of law. Any failure to uphold the rule of law leaves local communities, particularly a minority community, isolated and vulnerable.

Apart from my meeting with the new Prime Minister, my visit will focus particularly on the position of the Irish Community in Britain. This Community has been embarrassed and damaged, in an unfeeling and cynical way, by the recent actions of the IRA in Britain. We were reminded yesterday, in a menacing echo of an earlier comment in a speech by the President of Sinn Fein, that the IRA has not gone away.

I want to emphasise in my visit to Britain this week the work that the two Governments must do together to enhance the positive role that the Irish in Britain can play in bettering the living conditions for themselves, and for all who live on these islands. The same emphasis must also be placed on the positive role that can be played by British people living in Ireland.

In conclusion, I would like to say that we are about to enter a new century in Anglo-Irish relations. In past centuries, those relations were unequal, with all the complexities that flow from inequality. One of the first fruits of Ireland's recent economic success, and its new European role, is that Ireland now has the confidence to approach Anglo-Irish relations in a more creative and innovative way. There are many things we want to achieve - an end to political and sectarian violence being the first. The best context in which to achieve this is

through the vigorous pursuit of a confidence building agenda across all three strands of our relationships.

02.0 7.11