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Address by Dick Spring, TD, Tanaiste and Leader of the Labour Party at opening of New Ireland Forum, Dublin Castle, Monday, 30th May, 1983 at 2.30 p.m.

I wish to begin by referring to thoughts expressed by James Connolly at the beginning of the century well before the formation of the Labour Party. In a well known passage used by him on the title page of his pamphlet, *The New Evangel*, Connolly said:

"Ireland without her people is nothing to me, and the man who is bubbling over with love and enthusiasm for 'Ireland,' and can yet pass unmoved through our streets and witness all the wrong and suffering, the shame and degradation wrought upon the people of Ireland, aye, wrought by Irishmen upon Irish men and Irish women, without burning to end it, is, in my opinion, a fraud and a liar in his heart, no matter how he loves that combination of chemical elements which he is pleased to call 'Ireland.'"

As the Leader of the oldest political party in the Republic, I can draw from these words the magnitude of the challenge that still faces us on this island. They can make us recall the historical deficiencies of political evolution in Ireland, encourage us to examine whatever social and constitutional progress we have made, and stimulate us to identify the relationship, if any, between various formal political attitudes and the daily lives and aspirations of ordinary people. We are here today to start in a formal way and in a particular context, a process of taking stock, of analysing ourselves, of examining the real meaning of the political theories that our varying political traditions profess. It is up to ourselves, as politicians, to rise to the occasion, to realise fully the difficulties and the obstacles in the task before us, to temper our vision with realism and sanity while working towards the areas that can mark legitimate progress.

I have drawn attention to my belief that we should show due caution towards well accepted formal political beliefs. But for the opening record, I beg leave to refer briefly to some quotations from Section Three (entitled Unity of the Irish People) of the basic Labour Party Programme adopted in 1980. There it is stated

"The Labour Party seeks the voluntary union of all Irish people and territory. The achievement of the voluntary unity of all the people of Ireland clearly implies that the real and profound differences that exist at present must be removed by persuasion, dialogue and communication, and not by the bomb and the bullet."

And also

"In accordance with its philosophy as a socialist party, the Labour Party pledges itself to the elimination of all sectarian laws, constitutional provisions and practices, both in the North and South, which are a major factor in dividing the working class, and deplores all appeals to sectarian passions and violence."

We have all come, and hopefully others will come in due time to this Forum, conscious of our own political traditions. We cannot, and should not seek to escape artificially from these traditions. Rather our task is to see how they can be developed and made relevant to the task, in the light of past experience, of deepening and broadening democratic values on this island. It is not just simply a matter of seeking to barter or trade "concessions" - it is a question of how all traditions in this island can relate their philosophies to the needs of the future.

Broadly, I hope that the New Ireland Forum will work to create a programme for political development which will have cross-community support, and will unify Irish people in a tolerant and caring society.

We must recognise the legitimacy of all arguments that genuinely purport to be democratic. The Forum to achieve any significant programme must

- Look to the nature of the society that could evolve on an All Ireland basis.
- Consider what we can do to help create the environment in which that society can develop.
- Consider what changes must be made in the Republic to increase the level of tolerance and understanding which are necessary to achieve political progress in an all-Ireland context.

In furtherance of these, the New Ireland Forum must develop into an exchange of views with the common objective of an accepted political development rather than a sterile repetition of two political aspirations. Let us face now that this will be traumatic and revealing, but how we face it will be a test of our seriousness.

The politics of this island has been dominated for the last sixty years by the politics of partition; not just by the reality of partition, but by our mentality which has involved politicians from all three interested areas, the Republic, Northern Ireland and Britain, treating the problems of this island in a twenty-six county or a six county context rather than viewing it from a thirty-two county perspective.

We should, in my view, examine the effects that British rule has had on Northern Ireland and be prepared to indicate the areas where the consequences of their rule have created major obstacles towards an integrated society in Northern Ireland. An honest appraisal of the effects of Irish rule in the Republic is also essential. In the context of the problems besetting the whole island, we must seek to clarify for ourselves the meaning of our inherited political values now in 1983.

Let me advance further with these thoughts. The 1937 Constitution made affirmations relevant to the political life of the whole island but the thrust and meaning of many of its specific clauses were conceived as applying to a twenty-six county state. For many years, also, the liberal and democratic content of the "unwritten" constitution of Britain was not in fact visible in Northern Ireland.

The British, who were responsible for the exercise of Government chose to ignore widespread discrimination and injustice. We, in the Republic, often asserted strongly our aspirations and our concern, but, by and large, chose like the British to play the politics of partition by leaving well enough alone.

However, now, any process involving a new Ireland will involve issues of constitutional change. Proposals may emerge that will be seen by some as radical, odd, and even dangerous to inherited political and religious traditions. What is seen by some as necessary or progressive will be seen as a mark of betrayal by others. There will not be a uniformity of response across the island as a whole to new propositions relating to Articles 2 and 3, civil liberties, increased prohibitions on abortion, provisions relating to marriage breakdown and others, either emerging in the Forum or from other sources. The controversy surrounding current proposals for a constitutional amendment in the Republic is by no means an argument against interest groups sponsoring constitutional change. It rather tells us that we as politicians have a lot to learn if we are to face successfully even more complex and controversial issues in a New Ireland Forum.

The reality of economic difficulties, both North and South, is a major priority that all traditions can address with common concern. The unemployment crisis is not confined to one part of the island or to one religious grouping. Issues relating to industrial strategy, energy planning, agricultural trade and the evolution of social policy represent major challenges throughout the island. Although again there will be divergences, both ideological and strategic, both between political parties North and South and within North and South, in my view the New Ireland Forum must address itself to the critical issues of economic and social policy. Some progress was made at different times in the past, and there have been many good intentions. Political difficulties were often an obstacle, but also

territorial priorities and the competitive dimension, for example in seeking to attract foreign investment have tended to push into the background any continuous thinking aimed at major schemes or programmes of collaborative action. Participation by Britain and the European Economic Community is of course of major importance in these areas.

Again, in relation to world affairs, there are clearly divergent views on the island on the issue of neutrality. We in the Labour Party believe strongly that neutrality should be a fundamental part of Irish national and international policy. This is not a preference for an isolationist Ireland, but for a positive philosophy for an active neutrality which implies a total commitment to peace, detente and disarmament, together with a programme of involvement in world affairs in which policy is determined independently in accordance with national needs and the merits of the individual case. Neutrality does not and must not imply indifference to the moral issues raised by the great political problems and challenges of the present time. I hope that my party's approach in this area will be seen positively, and as an important ingredient in the overall political evolution of Ireland.

Issues of Church/State relations will need to be analysed and discussed. Democratic society cannot prosper without widespread consent by the population at large to some basic values and institutions. Inside such a framework the proponents of radical change can compete with traditional or conservative forces. Very often, basic religious beliefs or the common view of churches are key components of the basic consensus; at other times if the views of one particular church are seen to prevail in areas of major disagreement, serious difficulties will arise in building a common identity among the community in question.

Religious traditions are important on this island and the organised churches take and are entitled to take strong views on major questions of public policy. It is desirable such positions are open rather than secret, and are not perceived as the unseen vetoes of one religious tradition as against another.

It remains with the people and the politicians to adjudicate on the views of the churches in the making of political choices. Notions of church control or church vetoes, real or imagined, should be removed in any overall vision of a new Ireland, and must be distinguished from the concept of free and open profession of religion and the public expression of the views of churches.

In the New Ireland Forum, we should not only solicit and encourage the views of Northern Unionists and, of course, accommodate their eventual participation in the Forum if they were ever to wish for it, but must also endeavour to understand the background to those fears that are expressed by the Unionist community. In fact, a process of constructive dialogue with a wide range of representative interest groups is essential. It is useful to recall, for example, that trade union organisation has for many years spanned both territorial and religious divides. The trade union movement has been many times a bulwark of responsibility and of calm collected reaction in times of high political passion. I hope that we will be enabled to draw widely on the expertise and experience of the trade unions in our deliberations.

I have chosen today not to focus on the role of Britain or the British people in any movement towards a New Ireland. It would, of course, be a critical and continuing one.

Traditional nationalist and traditional unionist politics have failed; we must ask why they have both failed? I say that they have failed because they have never succeeded in accommodating each other in the structures they have proposed. The New Ireland Forum represents an alternative approach, which hopefully will recognise the fundamental differences but must strive to ensure that these differences do not act as obstacles to either reconciliation or political development.

The Forum affords us the opportunity to analyse and discuss the nature of society that we wish to see evolve on this island and challenges us in the Republic to face up to the reality that our society, just as much as Northern Ireland, will have to change if we are serious in our aspiration of Irish unity. Are we prepared to make these changes? That is a fundamental question for this Forum.