

McCartin

Finally, Mr President, I want to assure this House that I believe that if Fianna Fail were put into office in the morning, they would back this Agreement and seek to make it work, as we have done.

I would like to say to John Hume, the leader of the SDLP in Northern Ireland, that I admire the manner in which he has pursued the democratic interest in Northern Ireland over the years in the face of the bomb and the bullet...

(Applause)

... in the face of provocation from those who pretend to believe in democracy and yet deliberately ignore it. I commend his course of action and his example to persecuted minorities everywhere.

Mr Paisley is growling behind me. He does not believe in this Community. He will seek to use it this morning for his own ends.

(Applause)

Mr Hume (S). — Mr President, like the previous speaker, I agree that the time at our disposal is not adequate to deal with this subject. However, let us begin by recalling the problem to which the British/Irish Agreement is addressed, a problem which goes back centuries. The divisions among the people of Ireland, the violence, the killings go back centuries.

It is not an easy problem to solve. The past fifteen years have seen the worst violence in our history. In a population of a million and a half people, two and a half thousand have lost their lives in political violence. That is the equivalent, as I said recently, of 86 000 people in Britain. 20 000 have been maimed. That is the equivalent of three-quarters of a million people in Britain. Two new prisons have been built and a third is about to open. 11 billion pounds worth of damage has been done to the economy of Ireland, North and South. We have a generation of young people who have known nothing but violence and armed soldiers on their streets and who, when they reach the age of eighteen, find themselves in the highest unemployment in our history. 40% of our population are under 25. If that is not a time bomb for the future, what is? If that is not a challenge to the two prime ministers of the two countries involved to take urgent, decisive and joint action, then what is?

In examining this agreement, no-one should pretend that it is a final solution to the Irish problem. No agreement of itself can offer that. What it does offer is a framework in which a process of reconciliation can begin, a framework in which the barriers that divide the Irish people, the prejudices, the hatred, can be progressively broken down, a framework in which no-one should fear to participate because the process of reconciliation must involve everyone. What emerges

from it must involve the agreement of everyone. Indeed, those who refuse to participate are only saying that they have no confidence in their own ability to represent their own traditions and their own attitude.

This is the first time, in my view, that we have had a proper framework that addresses the problem, because the problem of Northern Ireland is not about relations within Northern Ireland alone. It is about relations within Ireland and relations between Britain and Ireland. And if the framework of the problem is the British/Irish framework, that should also be the framework of the solution. I believe that within that framework we can begin the process, which will take a long time; of healing the wounds, the hatreds, the prejudices that have so disfigured the island of Ireland.

Let me make one final point. This House will no doubt note that the institutions set out in this agreement are rather similar to the institutions of the Community that we represent in this Chamber. The Anglo-Irish Conference is the equivalent of the Council of Ministers, the proposed interparliamentary tier is the equivalent of this House and the secretariat is the equivalent of the Commission. Those similar institutions have enabled the peoples of Western Europe represented in this House — peoples who for centuries have been involved in war, conflict and slaughter, who twice in this century alone slaughtered one another by the million with a savagery and hatred far deeper than anything that we have seen in Ireland — to end conflict and war on the continent of Europe and to grow together at their own speed. That being the case, is it an exaggerated hope to express in this Chamber today that the same institutions set out in the Anglo-Irish Agreement can provide a similar opportunity to the people of Ireland to grow together at their own speed and to end conflict, hatred and violence in that island?

I commend this Agreement to this House, Mr President, not because I think it offers an instant solution but because it offers an opportunity to democrats to begin the process of breaking down the divisions of Ireland. The challenges involved in it and the risks involved in it are daunting, but there is no road towards a solution to the Irish problem which does not contain risks. The choices are neither difficult nor daunting, because there is no other choice.

(Sustained applause)

Lady Elles (ED). — Mr President, let me say, first of all, that I am very pleased to be following Mr Hume in this debate. As I am speaking on behalf of the European Democratic Group, I must clarify the position of Mr John D. Taylor who, for understandable reasons, does not support this particular resolution. He would be here himself to state his opinion but he is on official business in Northern Ireland. At the same time, I have to say that we have the total support of our Danish colleagues in tabling this amended resolution.