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Speech by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Dr. Garret Fitzgerald, T.D.,
to the Fine Gael Dublin South-East Executive, Deerpark Lounge, Rosbuck,
8.45 p.m., Wednesday, 26th May.

Relations between North and South have for generations been bedevilled by misunderstandings that have aggravated the very real, but, I believe, not insuperable, differences which have divided the Irish people.

No one who has had contact with members of the Loyalist majority in Northern Ireland can fail to have been struck by the distorted image of the Republic and its people which many of them hold.

Of course the distortions often have some remote basis in reality. We cannot ignore the fact that, whatever the historical reasons may be, our Constitution contains provisions introduced in 1937, such as Articles 2 and 3 dealing with the 'national territory' concept, and Article 44 dealing with the dissolution of marriage, which are objectively unacceptable even to moderate Unionist opinion in Northern Ireland. Moreover although religious bigotry in the Republic is minimal, and is a pale reflection of what prevails in the North, we cannot deny that it exists here. But the superstructure of fear and even hatred that built up in the North in relation to the Republic over the years is totally disproportionate to this narrow foundation of objective fact about the Republic, its Constitution, its laws and its practices, to which Northern Loyalists could reasonably take exception. And such a superstructure of fear can survive only because of ignorance - ignorance of the reality of our State, of how it works, of what kind of people live in it, and of their attitudes to such matters as eventual political re-unification and the I.R.A. and its activities.

The Government has done what it can to dispel this ignorance. By the firmness of its actions against the I.R.A., the close co-operation instituted with the Northern Ireland security forces in Border areas, and the enactment of the Criminal Justice (Amendment) Act empowering the trial of people in the Republic for offences of violence committed in Northern Ireland, we have, I believe, convinced many Loyalists in Northern Ireland that their old beliefs that the Republic was a safe haven for terrorists is untrue. All the

time the Government's unambiguous acceptance of the fact that Northern Ireland is a part of the United Kingdom, and that any change in its status can and should come about only with the free consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland, has greatly diminished the fears of the Loyalist community created by the existence of Articles 2 and 3 of the Constitution and by propaganda speeches made here in earlier decades.

But the problem of ignorance and misunderstanding cannot be dispelled by government action alone. Only personal action and personal contact, on a scale and of an intensity that is not possible for a small group of political figures, / can complete the task and ensure the dispelling of the myths about the Republic and its people that are still believed by some in Northern Ireland.

Even before the violence began at the end of the 1960's there was all too little contact of this kind initiated from the Republic. While very many Northerners visited the Republic for holidays, or on business, or in connection with sporting occasions, travel in the other direction was always much smaller relatively. Thus in 1968 whereas per resident of Northern Ireland there was an average of 4.5 visits to the Republic involving overnight stays, there were only 1.2 similar visits to the North per resident of the Republic. A similar disproportion of almost 4 to 1 was to be noted in the number of day-trips in the two directions.

Recognising all the difficulties that exist in present circumstances - difficulties that have in fact greatly reduced the volume of cross-border movement in both directions - it should be clear that an intensification of personal relations between Northerners and Southerners is of vital importance to the task of dispelling the myths and delusions that still exist on each side of the Border about the other - and especially, I feel within Northern Ireland. Voluntary associations should take every opportunity to arrange for exchange visits, towns in the Republic should be prepared to enter into twinning arrangements with towns in the North, and groups of individuals who care about the restoration of peace in our island, should take the initiative to organise informal contacts at every level.

The initiative already taken by the Athlone Movement for peace is an example of the kind of action that can provide a basis for inter-town contacts of this kind. That Movement's action in organising a voluntary petition against violence, for which they received well over 5,000 spontaneous signatures - more than the number of people who voted ~~in the town~~ in the last urban district elections - is an example that other towns could usefully follow. Meetings with groups such as this, whose commitment to peace and reconciliation is so manifest, and whose rejection of violence is so absolute and so courageous, must impress any Northern Loyalist with whom such a group might be in contact.

If a unity of the hearts and minds of Irish people is to take place, upon which alone a real basis for peace and reconciliation can be built it can come about only through human contact. It is tragic that before the days of violence we in the Republic did so little to initiate such contacts; it is doubly tragic that such limited contacts as then existed have been reduced as a result of violence. And it is clear that the way through to a peaceful solution will not be opened unless much greater personal contact between Irish people North and South can be achieved, so as to dispel the false beliefs held about each other, - false beliefs which stand in the way of reconciliation and friendship between the vast majority of people of goodwill North and South.