

REPORT ON
INTRODUCTORY
ADDRESS

ADDRESS BY SECRETARY OF STATE SIR PATRICK MAYHEW, QC MP

Good morning ladies and gentlemen. I am delighted that so many of you could attend this very important conference to discuss the European Union's special assistance Initiative for peace and reconciliation.

The European Union has been in the vanguard in offering practical assistance to help consolidate the peace process. First, through an increase in its contribution to the International Fund for Ireland, which continues to do such valuable work throughout the Province and in the border counties of the Republic of Ireland. Now we have been given even greater support through this new Initiative which the former President of the Commission, Jacques Delors, supported enthusiastically and which was endorsed at the Essen summit last December.

The new Community Initiative is a measure of the commitment of the European Community to the peace process. It is worth 300 million ECUs (or £230 million) over the next three years, with a possible extension for a further two years beyond that. This is on top of more than £1 billion of assistance which Northern Ireland will receive as an Objective I region through our Single Programme and other Community Initiatives up to the end of this decade.

The new Initiative will provide resources to complement the Government's own efforts to reinforce the prospects for a lasting peace. But it must have an identity and a dynamic that sets it apart and I am pleased that, in framing their proposals, the European Commission have given special emphasis to the central aim of promoting reconciliation. This is an entirely appropriate objective and one that will, I am sure, earn the wholehearted endorsement of everyone here today.

The Initiative will give particular attention to the needs of those individuals and communities who have suffered greatest disadvantage and loss over the years of conflict. This is already reflected in the Government's own priority of Targeting Social Need which seeks to ensure that resources are focused where need is greatest. However, I do think it is important that, while priority should rightly be given to those in greatest need, no part of our community should feel excluded from this new Initiative. It is vitally important that local interests across the Province should be satisfied that the programme of activities that emerge from this Initiative recognises and responds to their concerns.

I was pleased to note that the draft Guidelines for the Initiative also highlight the importance of measures to promote economic development. A healthy and growing economy provides a favourable environment in which to address both economic and social needs. With growing prosperity, the frustrations and despair of the areas of violence can be replaced by the hope of a better future built on a stable and free society with equality of opportunity for all.

Peace will greatly enhance the attractiveness of Northern Ireland as a place to do business, as a location for profitable investment and as somewhere desirable to visit as a tourist. Even in the comparatively short period that has elapsed since the cease-fire, and despite continuing uncertainty there has been ample evidence to bear out this thesis.

We are, of course, only at the beginning, and no one underestimates the difficulty of maintaining the momentum for growth. Experience throughout the European Union shows that a sustained effort over many years is needed to overcome the structural weakness of lagging regions. In relative terms Northern Ireland coped rather better than many European regions with the recent recession, but we continue to have serious problems. One of these is a very high level of long-term unemployment, particularly among men and disproportionately in the minority community. A sizeable section of the workforce has been without work for one or two years and in some cases even longer. I am hopeful that this new Initiative can make a real contribution to the campaign to tackle the root of this problem.

Despite such difficulties there are also many encouraging signs for the economy. For example:

- unemployment, though high, has been falling for some time and is now at its lowest for 13 years.
- the numbers in employment are at an all time high and show every indication of continuing to grow.
- business confidence is strong and getting stronger every day, while overall output and manufacturing production are both growing.

These are significant and encouraging indicators. They show that solid foundations for building a strong economy are in place. The new Initiative can play a part in achieving this goal by, for example

- making investment capital available on attractive terms, particularly for small and medium firms.
- accelerating the development of the tourism sector which offers the most immediate opportunity for growth: and, importantly, growth predominantly in rural areas where development is especially needed.
- extending the range of training opportunities which are available, particularly for those sectors which are facing change, whether expansion or contraction, as society returns to peaceful conditions: and, for marginalised and disadvantage groups.

I am greatly encouraged by the enthusiastic reception which the Social Inclusion priority of the Initiative has evoked. Government attaches great importance to this theme, which is central to the process of reconciliation.

Those who find themselves unable to participate fully in the life of the community often have many disadvantages. Inadequate education and training are common problems and so are lack of motivation and low self-esteem. The new Initiative can offer renewed hope to such people by targeting obstacles to inclusion at their source and providing practical assistance to communities, families and individuals through new structures of support.

Education has a vital role to play in this process and innovative ways of drawing marginalised young people and adults into the education process, possibly through more extensive use of the further education colleges, is one option to explore. We should, however, be prepared, where necessary, to go beyond the confines of the formal education system to achieve the objective of social inclusion.

There are also attractions in focusing greater attention on the need to provide a solid foundation for children, during the early years of their development. Investment at this stage could yield great dividends later. I would therefore welcome suggestions on how the new Initiative might contribute to this process, especially in the areas of nursery education and child-care so that the benefits are reaped by children and also by those parents wishing to return to active participation in the labour market.

Social Inclusion must also pay particular attention to the issue of marginalised youth. If we fail to engage these young people and draw them into socially productive activity, a great opportunity will be lost and our community will suffer in the years ahead. Government already devotes a great deal of attention to this issue, but I would welcome your views on how this new Initiative can add to our efforts.

Many would agree that, to obtain the greatest value, a multi-dimensional approach to Social Inclusion is essential. To achieve this, partnerships involving central Government departments, local statutory agencies, the voluntary and community sectors, and where appropriate the private sector, need to be fostered to ensure that those who are most marginalised can be involved in an effective and integrated way. I am sure that you will have views on how these partnerships can be forged, in particular how they can be constructed to be truly representative of the area or interests which they would seek to benefit. We will be interested to hear how such partnerships could contribute to the effective, and hopefully rapid, delivery of assistance on the ground. It is clear that the concept of partnership involves challenges as well as opportunities.

It is also appropriate that urban and rural regeneration has been identified as one of the priority areas which the Initiative should address. Government regeneration Initiatives have already made a major contribution to countering the destruction which has been inflicted on our cities, towns and villages. A range of measures, including, Urban Development Grant and the Making Belfast Work and Londonderry Initiatives have stimulated private enterprise and investment in Belfast and Londonderry. In provincial towns, environmental improvements have been carried out and local economic regeneration schemes have been promoted in the most disadvantaged areas of the Province. Areas of dereliction have also been transformed by comprehensive development to meet commercial and housing needs.

The special difficulties of sustaining vibrant rural communities have also been recognised and, since the Government's Rural Development Programme was initiated in 1991, over £17 million has been invested in 26 rural development projects. A key feature of this programme is the emphasis placed on the development of partnerships between local communities, statutory interests, local authorities and the private sector. I am convinced that this is the way to proceed.

We will need to consider carefully how the new Initiative can add value to existing work in both urban and rural areas. This extends beyond physical development. It must involve local people as well as the public sector - without such participation no programme can be considered a success. The Conference will wish to give careful thought as to how the new Initiative will address this dimension.

The effects of a quarter century conflict have not been confined to Northern Ireland alone. The border counties of Ireland have also suffered, and it is entirely appropriate that the new Initiative should embrace these areas. The opportunities for cross border cooperation have never been greater than they are at present and this Initiative provides a valuable means to exploit such opportunities to the full. The cross border priority of the Initiative has identified some potential areas of cooperation but, I am sure there will be others including some which might be counted in the other priorities I have mentioned earlier. Your views on both the specific cross border priority and the wider cross border dimension of the programme will therefore be particularly welcome.

Clearly, there is a great deal of work to be done to frame a programme which is imaginative and takes full advantage of the opportunity presented by this new Initiative. The Guidelines are at present being considered by the European Parliament and other committees. I am assured that this process is being pursued energetically but it will inevitably take some time to complete. I do not think we can afford to wait for this to happen before starting to draft a programme, otherwise the flow of funds to projects may be delayed for many months. I think you will agree that such a delay would be very unwelcome.

We have therefore taken the decision to start framing a draft programme, without waiting for the Guidelines to emerge in their final form, so that it can be submitted as quickly as possible. I am sure that this is the correct approach, but if we are to make this a successful programme it will require the fullest possible cooperation from all interested parties working with the Member States to meet a very tight deadline. This conference is a vital part of the process. Next month the European Parliament will also host a conference in Northern Ireland to canvass views on the Initiative and we will study carefully their conclusions. However, I want to assure you that consultation will continue as the draft programme takes shape and we are completely open to any ideas which you may have subsequent to both of these events.

This new Initiative is a wonderful opportunity to develop a truly innovative programme which will make a real contribution to building peace. It is time for bold and imaginative thinking which this conference can help to develop. I wish you well in your work and look forward to seeing the ideas which emerge from your discussions.

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Page - 12 -