Address to the Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly by the Prime Minister, the Rt Hon David Cameron MP

Thursday 9 June 2011

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(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Address by the Prime Minister, the Rt Hon David Cameron MP

Mr Speaker: It gives me great pleasure to welcome the Prime Minister, the Rt Hon David Cameron MP, to Parliament Buildings today. I am particularly pleased, Prime Minister, that you have been able to visit us so early in the life of the new Assembly. The last Assembly was the first in a generation to complete its full term. Even at this early stage, from the contributions made so far by new and returning Members alike, I am confident that the Assembly will be able to make a difference to the issues that affect the daily lives of the people we all represent. Like you, Prime Minister, I know that it is the challenges of the economy and of delivering public services on which all of us here are focused. Over the next number years, the Assembly will certainly be delivering for all the people of Northern Ireland.

I now invite you, Prime Minister, to address the Assembly.

The Prime Minister (The Rt Hon David Cameron MP): Mr Speaker, thank you for your kind invitation to address the Assembly today and for the very warm welcome that you have given me. It gives me great pleasure to congratulate you on your re-election as Speaker, a role that you exercised with such distinction over the past four years. The fact that you will hand over the Speakership to a representative from a different tradition stands as an example of co-operation between parties that will be widely welcomed.

I know that the calendar can have its own sensibilities in this part of the world, but it is an honour to address you on such an auspicious day, 9 June. This is the feast day of St Columba, who very specially symbolises the historic linkages and deep bonds between Britain and Ireland. He was born a prince in Donegal, was exiled in Iona and is honoured today in the Central Lobby of the Palace of Westminster. His monks provided not just an Irish national treasure, the Book of Kells, but a British national treasure, the Lindisfarne Gospels.

It is an honour to stand here and speak in this historic Chamber. Of course, I recognise that this is not a place without controversy. In the past, it was for some a guarantee of their place within the Union; for others, it was a symbol of a state and a system from which they felt excluded. I do not intend to ignite that debate. However, I am reminded of the words of King George V, when he opened the Northern Ireland Parliament in 1921, and his appeal to all Irish men and women:

> *"to stretch out the hand of forbearance and conciliation, to forgive and forget, and to join in making for the land which they love a new era of peace, contentment and goodwill".*

Nobody suggests that we have finally reached that point yet and that there are not significant challenges still to overcome, but few can argue that we have not moved a long way towards it over the past two decades. Two events last month, I believe, stand testament to that. The first was Her Majesty The Queen's extraordinary and historic visit to the Republic of Ireland. Nobody who was with her could have been in the least doubt as to the genuine warmth of the welcome she received and Her Majesty's real joy in being there. Unthinkable just a decade ago, the visit was a hugely symbolic act of reconciliation and indicated the normalisation of relations between our two countries.

The second event was the Assembly election itself, which passed off peacefully and in a relatively good-natured manner. Indeed, when I spoke to Peter Robinson and Martin McGuinness to congratulate them on their re-election, they both pointed out that it was

rather more peaceful and good-natured than the referendum on the alternative vote that we had just had. That in itself is surely a sign of just how far Northern Ireland has come. None of this could have happened without the extraordinary courage and commitment of people here from all parties and all parts of the community over many years. I would also like to pay tribute to successive Irish Governments, without whom the progress that has been made here simply would not have been possible; to successive American Administrations, for their positive contributions at vital times; and to my predecessors as Prime Minister: Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and John Major, who took some great risks to begin the process in the early 1990s.

Mr Speaker, our task is to move Northern Ireland even further forward, and today I want to speak about what we must all do to achieve that. There are some things that you, as Assembly Members here, are responsible for; there are some things that Westminster is responsible for; and there are those things that we must do together, working with our colleagues throughout Britain and Ireland. I would like to say a few words about each, but, before I do, let me say that my commitment to the health and well-being and to the success of Northern Ireland is heartfelt and sincere. I am passionate about this part of the United Kingdom, deeply mindful of history and deeply determined to work with you towards a better future.

In my first week as Prime Minister, I visited Northern Ireland to reassure people of my support and our coalition Government's support for the devolved institutions and for all the agreements that had been signed to ensure that we had peaceful progress. When the Saville inquiry reported its findings on the events of Bloody Sunday, I did not hesitate to apologise for the misdeeds that were carried out on that day, which were unjustified and unjustifiable. I did so in part to close a chapter on one of the sorriest episodes in our country's history but also because I knew that we do not honour all those who have served with such distinction in keeping the peace and upholding the rule of law in Northern Ireland by hiding from the truth.

I have also held Cabinet discussions on tackling terrorism here because I share the determination of this Assembly to defeat this threat and defeat all those who do not respect the democratic will of the people of Northern Ireland.

On another issue of great concern — the Presbyterian Mutual Society — I said I would act; I did act; and today I am pleased to see that the first payments are planned.

However, I do not view Northern Ireland through the prism of past and present security issues or other issues. The linkages and connections between our peoples are so strong. I love coming here, whether it is to see the opera — of course, Opera Northern Ireland launched its new season in Belfast today; to walk through the beautiful glens of Antrim or even, as I have done, to swim off the Antrim coast; or indeed to hold Cameron Direct public meetings. I think I am the first politician from Great Britain to hold that kind of meeting here in Northern Ireland.

I will always be a great advocate of what Northern Ireland and the people who live here have to offer, but, Mr Speaker, being an advocate of Northern Ireland and wanting to see it progress does not mean remaining silent on the problems that remain and the responsibilities of Members of this Assembly. I think that I have a duty to give my honest view. Whether you serve here as a Minister, as a member of a Committee or as a Back-Bench Member, you all carry the responsibility over the next four years of delivering real improvements to people's lives.

Politics here is now more stable than it has been for over a generation, but, as the institutions mature, people will look for more than survival. There is now an ever greater expectation of real delivery. As in other parts of the UK, political institutions need to deliver, or they will lose popular support. To match expectations, politics here, I believe, needs to move beyond the peace process and a focus on narrow constitutional matters to the economic and social issues that affect people in their daily lives. It does not matter whether people are from Coleraine or Cardiff, Birmingham or Ballymena, Arbroath or Antrim, they all want the same things in life. They want the self-confidence that comes with work; the security that comes from safe streets that are free from antisocial behaviour; and the happiness and joy that comes from a stable home life and a strong family. Against a background of greater political stability, there is a greater opportunity than ever before to put normal, mainstream politics first.

If politics is about anything, it is about public service on behalf of the whole community, not just those who vote for us. A crucial area where, I believe, we need to move beyond the peace process is in tackling the causes of division within society here. Given the history of Northern Ireland, I do not for one minute underestimate the scale of the challenge, but it is a depressing fact that, since the 2006 St Andrews Agreement, the number of so-called peace walls has increased from 37 to 48. It is disappointing that, in too many places, Protestant and Catholic communities remain largely segregated, sharing the same space but living their lives apart.

According to one survey, the cost of division, through the duplication of public services alone, is around £1·5 billion a year. This is not just about the economic cost; it is about the social cost too. It is these divisions that help to sustain terrorism and other criminal activities, particularly within deprived communities. I acknowledge the work that the previous Executive began on this, through the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy, and I welcome the fact that the new Executive are committed to taking it forward. Clearly, more needs to be done. Most of the responsibilities for this, such as community relations, are, of course, devolved. We will support you in whatever way we can, but it is mainly in your hands. I am clear though: we cannot, we must not have a future in which everything in Northern Ireland is shared out on sectarian grounds. Northern Ireland needs a genuinely shared future, not a shared-out future.

If that is your task, let me say something about mine. I take my responsibilities for this part of the United Kingdom seriously. I will stand by and stand up for you in every way that I can. I will always stand up for the truth and be prepared to face up to difficult realities, however uncomfortable that might sometimes be for the UK Government. I knew that dealing with the Saville report would be one of my most important early responsibilities as Prime Minister, and I did not put it off. Through Saville, we have shown that, where the state had acted wrongly, we will face up to and account for what we have done. Others too must think about how to face up to their part in the mistakes and tragedies of the past. In the memorable words of The Queen, we can all think of things that might have been:

> *"done differently or not at all".*

However, she also said that, whilst we must respect this history, we are not bound by it. We must all think about how, together, we can move on.

We owe it to the people of Northern Ireland to face forwards and not endlessly examine events from before. That does not mean that I rule out any public inquiries in the future, but I stand by my pledge that there will be no more costly and open-ended inquiries into the past.

I will stand by Northern Ireland in respect of your constitutional future too. My views on the Union are well known, and, as I said at the general election, as Prime Minister, I will never be neutral in expressing my support for it. For me, what we can achieve together will always be greater than what we can do apart, but, as the agreement makes very clear, the constitutional future of Northern Ireland does not rest in my hands or those of the UK Government, whatever our preferences might be; it rests in the hands of people here. We will always back the democratic wishes of the people of Northern Ireland, whether that is to remain part of the United Kingdom, as is my strong wish, or to be part of a united Ireland. That is my absolute guarantee and a clear message to those who still seek to pursue their aims by violence.

I will also stand by the devolution settlement. I want devolution to work. I believe in it, head, heart and soul. Neither I nor Owen Paterson has any desire to interfere in those matters that are rightly run by locally accountable politicians. They are for you to decide, according to your priorities. The same applies to the future of the institutions here and how they might evolve. The Government's view is that, over time, we would like to see a more normal system with a Government and an Opposition, consistent with power sharing and inclusiveness. We agree with Bertie Ahern, who said in 2008:

> *"There will come a time when people say, 'You need an opposition, you need an us and them'".*

However, as I made clear at the general election, we will make no changes without the agreement of the parties of this Assembly.

Standing by and standing up for Northern Ireland means something else. It means being realistic about the economic challenges faced by this part of our country. Every time I come to Northern Ireland and see the great cranes

of Harland and Wolff, I am conscious of your proud industrial past, even more so a week after the centenary of the launch of the Titanic. Yet, today, like so many other parts of the UK and for reasons that we all understand here, Northern Ireland is simply too dependent on the state for economic activity. According to one report, around three quarters of your GDP is accounted for by state spending. At a time when are dealing with the biggest Budget deficit in our peacetime history, that is unsustainable and has to change.

We recognise that the difficulties facing Northern Ireland, as you chart a new, more sustainable economic future, require us in Westminster to act responsibly. That is why we made sure that Northern Ireland did proportionately better than other parts of the UK in the spending review. By the end of this Parliament, the Northern Ireland resource budget will have gone down by 6·9%. That is 1·7% a year, which is far less than the 8·3% UK average or the cuts to most Departments, averaging 19%. Northern Ireland continues to receive 25% more per head in public spending than England. The days are over when the answer to every problem is simply to ask the Treasury for more money. That applies here as much as it does in other parts of the UK.

Like you, the Government are looking at new ways to revive the private sector and turn Northern Ireland into a dynamic, prosperous, enterprise-led economy for the twenty-first century. Do not get me wrong: Northern Ireland is already a great location for investment. You have excellent transport connections to the rest of the UK, to Ireland and to the rest of Europe. You have the English language; great educational results; two brilliant universities; highly competitive operating costs; 100% broadband access; Project Kelvin, linking north America, Northern Ireland and western Europe; a strongly pro-business climate led by the Executive; and, not least, the benefits of being part of the UK economy, in which our structural deficit will be eliminated by 2015.

The challenge is to attract that investment. Many of the powers to promote enterprise, such as education, training, planning and infrastructure, rest with you. Others are the preserve of Westminster. As part of the UK, Northern Ireland will benefit from the measures to promote growth that we have already announced, such as cuts in business taxes. However, I recognise that, in Northern Ireland, we need to go further. You have two unique challenges: the legacy of violence and a land border with a state that has significantly lower corporate taxes. The consultation paper, which was launched in March and runs to 24 June, focused heavily on the possibility of devolving powers over corporation tax to this Assembly. I am not going to prejudge the outcome of the consultation today, although I understand the strength of feeling in the main business organisations on this issue and, indeed, across all political parties, so I can assure you that the Chancellor and I will take the consultation seriously and give it proper consideration.

There are some areas where you are very much in the lead; there are others where I am in the lead; and there are the things that we must do together, such as, in particular, standing united against the threat of terrorism. The murder of Ronan Kerr in April was a vile and cowardly act, yet it was one of an increasing number of attacks that have taken place over the past two years. These terrorists have no mandate, they offer nothing, and they will never succeed. The people of Ireland, North and South, who backed the 1998 agreement with such overwhelming democratic majorities will ensure that, as will those from right across the community, including politicians and representatives of the GAA, who turned out with such respect at Ronan Kerr's funeral. Who here could fail to have been moved by the dignity and words of PC Kerr's mother when she said this:

> *"We were so proud of Ronan and all that he stood for. Don't let his death be in vain"?*

Tackling terrorism is a joint effort in which the Northern Ireland Executive have a crucial role to play. For our part, the UK Government have made countering the terrorist threat here a top priority. Within weeks of taking office in May 2010, we endorsed an additional £45 million for policing. In March, the Chancellor agreed to an exceptional four-year deal that will give the PSNI access to a further £200 million, as requested by the Chief Constable. Of course, we will continue the unprecedented co-operation that exists between Ministers in London, Belfast and Dublin, to support the superb links between the PSNI and the gardaí. As the Garda

Commissioner said after the tragic murder of Constable Kerr:

> *"Our uniforms may be woven from different cloth, but the police on this island are bound together by a shared resolve and determination".*

I thank all those who work tirelessly to protect the public here from terrorism. This Government will continue to stand fully behind them in thwarting those who choose to attack the democratic will of the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker, I want to see a peaceful, stable and prosperous Northern Ireland for everybody; a Northern Ireland in which everyone is treated with equal respect, whatever their community background or political aspiration; a Northern Ireland that is inclusive, tolerant and outward-looking; a Northern Ireland that sees its best days ahead rather than in a dim and distant past; and a Northern Ireland in which everyone has a genuinely shared future. To achieve those objectives, I am committed to working with all parties and with all parts of the community. My door is open when circumstances require it. We will never put party or narrow sectional interest above what we judge to be in the interests of the community as a whole.

Huge strides forward have been taken in Northern Ireland over recent years. The main paramilitary campaigns have ended; stable, inclusive and devolved government has been restored; the constitutional issue has been settled on the basis of consent; and relations across these islands have never been stronger. It gives you the opportunity now to move on from the politics of endless negotiations or of the latest political agreement to making these institutions work to address people's everyday concerns. Let us work together to make devolution a success; let us work together to revive the economy; let us work together to build a shared future. In working together, be assured that you have a Prime Minister, a Secretary of State and a Government who will always stand by the people here in Northern Ireland. Thank you. *[Applause.]*

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