

## **Taoiseach Bertie Ahern Speech**

***Remarks made by Taoiseach Bertie Ahern, T.D., Prime Minister of Ireland  
Wednesday, 24 September 2003, at the University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT***

"It is a very great honor for Tony Blair and myself to be awarded the Thomas J. Dodd Prize in International Justice and Human Rights and indeed to be the first recipients. I welcome Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott here representing the Prime Minister.

The Prize is named after Thomas Dodd who had a distinguished career at the bar, before serving for nearly 20 years as a Senator. As a lawyer, he took on organized crime, championed young people during the Great Depression, fought against the Ku Klux Klan in the 1930s, defended the right of trade unions to organize, and played a part in prosecuting German industrialists at the Nuremberg trials. He steered wide of Senator Joe McCarthy.

We are also grateful to his son Senator Chris Dodd, a valued friend of Ireland, for the contribution that he has made over many years to the promotion of peace in Ireland, working closely with Senator Ted Kennedy, and advising the Clinton White House during many crucial periods in the peace process. The American contribution to peace in Ireland, which is still ongoing work in progress, has been important, substantial and greatly valued and appreciated.

Former Senator George Mitchell acted as Northern Ireland envoy and mediator, work now carried on under President Bush by Richard Haass. We deeply appreciate the political and moral support and attention we have received from this great democracy, which has carried us over many difficulties.

One thing we have learned is that no matter what the difficulties we must keep on going and never give up hope.

Ending a long-running conflict is never simple or tidy. Getting a cease fire that held long enough to allow negotiations and political progress to be made was the first challenge that we faced. The next step was to assemble the parties around a table addressing the roots of conflict as well as the consequences of its cessation. Remedying the defects of earlier attempts at a political settlement was a necessary task that had to be addressed by parties that had felt deep hostility towards each other.

For fifty years, Northern Ireland, which is a deeply divided community, was run on the principles of majoritarian democracy. The founding fathers in the United States well understood the dangers to which a minority, permanently excluded

from power, could be exposed in this situation. The civil rights movement in America was an important inspiration for Northern Nationalists, but reform met stiff political resistance. The resort to violence in reaction was incapable of solving the problem, but unfortunately it took twenty-five years before this was universally appreciated.

Many honorable and inspired political initiatives came to nought, but the main ideas survived and were incorporated into the Good Friday Agreement.

The successful negotiation of the Good Friday Agreement was one of the proudest moments of my political life. It is an Agreement that I fought hard to achieve. It is an Agreement that I am convinced will stand the test of time.

The great obstacle to peaceful compromise is fear and distrust, the sense that a community, if it is not careful, is in danger of losing everything. The Good Friday Agreement overwhelmingly ratified by the people of Ireland, North and South, is very well balanced in the way in which the needs of each community are addressed. It is also about creating the conditions in which fundamental political aims can be pursued by exclusively peaceful and democratic means and the culture of violence and repression abandoned on all sides.

The Agreement established power-sharing institutions as well as North-South and East-West bodies, reflecting the totality of relationships between Britain and Ireland. They have demonstrated that they are capable of working well to the satisfaction of nearly everyone, but they have been disrupted by outside factors.

Unfortunately, devolved government in Northern Ireland has been suspended for the past year. Since that time Tony Blair and I together with the party leaders involved have been working to re-establish the trust and confidence necessary to restore and sustain the institutions. Earlier this year, following intensive negotiations, we were almost there. However, we were not able to clear the final hurdles and achieve the required outcome.

We are again entering a crucial phase in the process. Over the next few short weeks we have a real opportunity to end the uncertainties. The republican movement must make it clear, in a way that convinces unionists, and all of us, that paramilitary activity, as previously set out by both Governments, is at an end for good. At the same time, Unionists must reassure nationalists that they are fully committed to all of the Good Friday institutions and that they will participate in a full and sustained way.

The people of Northern Ireland are entitled to working democratic institutions. It would be wrong to assume that all of the progress we have made over recent years,

the peace - not a perfect peace, but a peace that has been sustained - the institutional reform, the economic and social progress, that all of this can continue in the absence of a stable political environment, and that decisions can be deferred indefinitely.

The hurts and divisions of the past run deep for many people and much work remains to be done. But the signs are hopeful. The most peaceful summer in decades provides a backdrop that can enable everyone to move ahead.

Elections are a key part of the way forward and Tony Blair and I and the leaders of the pro-Agreement parties are working to create the conditions for elections to take place that will allow the earliest possible restoration of the Institutions.

While we have had many rounds of discussion to clarify and enhance the working of the Agreement and to overcome difficulties in its implementation, there is no coherent or acceptable alternative to what is a comprehensive peace settlement.

The time has come for the parties to rise to the challenge, to provide the leadership, to stretch their constituencies and take the decisions they know must be taken. My Government will exert all the effort and influence we have to bring these efforts to a successful conclusion.

And we know that in doing so we have the support and encouragement of our great friends here in the United States, not only at the level of the Administration and Congress but throughout the entire Irish-American community.

I would like to pay the warmest tribute to the quite extraordinary commitment shown by the British Prime Minister Tony Blair consistently over the past six years, to work for peace in partnership with the Irish Government and with others.

We need the Agreement to work as a decisive break with the past, and everyone to show an equal and unequivocal commitment to a new and democratic order in Northern Ireland.

Again, I am deeply honoured to share this Prize. And in doing so I give a pledge that I will continue to apply all my political energies to advance the peace process and to bring about the complete transformation of life on our island."