

Right Honourable Tony Blair Speech

Speech Delivered by Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott on Behalf of the Prime Minister Tony Blair, Wednesday, 24 September 2003, at the University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT

"Thank you Taoiseach, Senator Dodd, Senator Kennedy, Ambassador Dodd, President Austin, ladies and gentlemen. I am very honoured to be here today with the Taoiseach and on behalf of my Prime Minister, Tony Blair, to pay tribute to their efforts to bring about peace in Northern Ireland.

I am also delighted to be here with my old friend Senator Chris Dodd and his brother Thomas. Chris has been a close friend of mine for more than 25 years. Indeed in 1978 Chris and I held a joint European Parliament and Congress hearing in Brussels on the abuse of human rights in Argentina in order to draw attention to this issue in the months before the 1978 Argentina soccer World Cup. Chris has always followed in the footsteps of his distinguished father with his concern for human rights. He is a man I admire and respect. He has the honour to be a Senator but we all know that the title he is most proud of is to be father of his beautiful daughter Grace.

President Austin, I became a Member of the British Parliament in August 1970. Since then 3,280 people have been killed and over 36,000 have been injured as a result of terrorist activity in Northern Ireland. It has been the constant background to my entire political life. Indeed Ireland has been the constant background to British politics for at least 400 years. Everywhere you look, our two countries are linked.

My Parliamentary constituency of Hull in Yorkshire was the first city to close its gates to King Charles I and declare itself for Oliver Cromwell and the Parliamentary forces during the English Civil War. In Hull we are proud of that. And we are proud of the fact that Oliver Cromwell brought about the English Revolution 125 years before your War of Independence here in the United States. I note that there is also a town here in this area that is named after Oliver Cromwell. But it goes to the heart of the problem that Cromwell can be a hero in England and an anti-hero in Ireland where he prosecuted such violent and bloody campaigns.

In Hull there is also a statue of William of Orange outside the King Billy Pub. As some of you will know, King Billy was the Protestant King William III who defeated the Roman Catholic James II at the Battle of the Boyne in Ireland in sixteen-ninety. That is how far back our history goes. It is written on every street in our two countries.

For ten years of my life I was a steward on the Cunard transatlantic liner Britannic which used to call to pick up Irish emigrants at Cobh on the south coast of Ireland. It is a mark of how deep the divisions were that the liner company was careful not to mix northern Protestants with southern Catholics at the same table. That's just a small example of how the divisions within Irish society affected so many aspects of everyday life.

In the old days Cobh was known as Queenstown - a name given by the British Protestants who colonized Ireland throughout the sixteenth century. Ever since there has been conflict and ever since we have been trying to solve the problem. It is tragic and horrific that 900 members of the police and army have been murdered in Northern Ireland since 1969. Over these years that has caused some people in Britain to call for us to pull out of Northern Ireland and leave the people to their fate.

It is a tribute to your Taoiseach and to my Prime Minister Tony Blair that despite all the difficulties and frustrations - despite the political cost of the inevitable knock-backs - you have devoted and continue to devote so much time and energy to finding a lasting peace for Northern Ireland. Everyone said it was impossible to bring about an end to the violence. But you and the Prime Minister got on with the job. We all owe you a debt of gratitude for that.

President Austin, it is a great honour for me to be here to receive this award on the part of the Prime Minister. I would like to take the opportunity to deliver the following message which Tony Blair has asked me to read out:

Dear friends:

I am very sorry and disappointed that I can't be with you today. But I know that this distinguished audience, with its many years of experience of the pressures of Government, will understand the difficulty of being in two - if not more places - at the same time. But I would not want any of you to think - for a moment - that I am not greatly honoured and proud to be the first recipient of this award.

That pride is increased by the fact that I am sharing this honour with the Taoiseach. I know better than anyone just how much commitment, effort and time he has personally invested in helping the politicians and people of Northern Ireland move towards a better future. There have been long periods where I have seen more of Bertie than my closest Cabinet colleagues. Periods, in fact, where I have spent a great deal more time with him than I have with my wife.

I am delighted to say that our friendship has not just survived, but strengthened - as has my admiration for his dedication to bring peace to Northern Ireland.

Without his personal commitment, his patience and tireless efforts, it simply would not have been possible to make the significant progress that we have seen in recent years.

But as Bertie would be the first to recognize, these real advances would not have been possible without the immense help we have received from so many people over here in the United States. From politicians like Senator Dodd, who along with people such as Senator Kennedy, have for decades been promoting reconciliation in Northern Ireland. They never despaired when it looked hopeless but merely stepped up their efforts to ensure the voices of all sections of the community were heard and understood in Washington.

And, of course, politicians like Senator Mitchell and President Clinton. George Mitchell played an absolutely vital role in Northern Ireland at a vital time. Anyone with experience of Northern Ireland knows there are very few people who are universally liked and respected. George is one of a very few exceptions to this near universal rule. Despite all his other responsibilities, it is a measure of the man and his commitment to Northern Ireland - and to peace - that he still visits regularly. We can't thank him enough.

Bill Clinton is also someone whose dedication to Northern Ireland can't be over-estimated. Bertie and I knew that we could turn to him, at any time of day or night, and ask him to lift the phone to persuade Northern Ireland's politicians to take that extra and difficult step towards peace. Time and time again, he did it willingly - using all his personality and intellect, showing repeatedly that he understood not just the big picture but also the complexities. His contribution will never be forgotten.

But there are many, many other people across this side of the Atlantic - US politicians, businessmen, and women - who have willingly given up their time and used their influence for good to help lay the foundations for a better future for Northern Ireland. It is impossible to name all of them, but I promise they are not forgotten.

What's driven all of us to make these efforts, of course, is the deep desire of the overwhelming majority of the people of Northern Ireland for a better life and peaceful future. They - and their elected representatives - have displayed enormous courage, patience and determination to turn this dream into reality. They deserve all our support.

I am not going to under-estimate the obstacles we still have to overcome in the peace process. But when the Taoiseach and I met three weekends ago at Chequers, we agreed that now is the time to go the final mile. Why? Because the logic of the Agreement demands it. Last year I said in a speech in Belfast that now was the

time for what I called "acts of completion". The time for everyone to signal their willingness to implement the Agreement in full. That means the Government showing its willingness to make the changes in policing, equality and security demanded by the Agreement. It means unionists showing their commitment, not just to sharing power with nationalists, but to making the institutions secure and stable. But it also means the IRA recognizing that we could no longer carry on with it half in, and half out of the process.

That was my view last year - and it remains my view today. But last year I also said that I thought the people of Northern Ireland were ahead of the politicians in their desire to see the Agreement implemented in full. And this summer has borne out that belief.

For far too many years the summer has been a bad time in Northern Ireland. A season dominated by riots and confrontation. This year has been the quietest for a generation. That did not happen by accident. It was the result of a conscious effort on all sides. And that is partly why I believe that now is the time for all sides to take the final steps to make the Agreement complete - governments, unionists, nationalists, and republicans.

The outcome is by no means guaranteed. And, as always, we depend on the support and encouragement we receive from this side of the Atlantic. But I believe more passionately than ever, the Agreement offers the only viable way forward for the people of Northern Ireland and that it is our duty as elected politicians to make it work.

In thanking you again for the tremendous honour you have paid me and the Taoiseach through this award, I can promise that, on our part, there will be no let up in our efforts to do exactly that.

Signed: Tony Blair, Prime Minister

President Austin, I am grateful to have had the opportunity to read out the Prime Minister's letter.

If I may, I would like to end with a personal memory of the Omagh bomb five years ago. It is the nature of the human condition that hope comes out of all terrible events. The Omagh bomb was the worst terrorist atrocity in Northern Ireland when 29 people were killed on 15 August 1998. That bomb reminded us all of the reason why we needed a political process to bring about a lasting peace. In spite of all the difficulties, we are still on course to achieve that. And I am personally convinced that the political conditions will soon be re-established to allow devolution to be re-introduced.

I visited Omagh on behalf of the Prime Minister the day after the bomb because he was abroad. On that day I visited some of the victims in the hospital. A small boy lay unconscious. His mother said that he was a fanatical supporter of the Liverpool football team but that he had never been to England. She asked me if I would say a few words to the boy. I told him that when he was better I would take him to see Liverpool play. At that very moment his eyes flickered open, he smiled, said "how did Liverpool do yesterday" and fell back into unconsciousness. In the months that followed he made a full recovery and I was delighted to take him to a Liverpool football match where he received a tremendous welcome from the team and the whole crowd. The hope I got from that little boy is a symbol of my hope for Northern Ireland.

Thanks to the work of many people Northern Ireland is off the critical list. It is a sign of hope for conflicts throughout the world. President Austin, we are here to honour that spirit and encourage that hope. We are here to pay homage to two men who have done so much to work for peace in Northern Ireland and who have played such an important role in bringing peace about - the Taoiseach and the Prime Minister."