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THE FUTURE OF NORTH-SOUTH COOPERATION

Bertie Ahern, TD, Taoiseach

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ABSTRACT

THE FUTURE OF NORTH-SOUTH COOPERATION

This paper emphasises the central role of the Good Friday Agreement as the continuing blueprint for future political developments. The North-South bodies established under its auspices have worked quietly but efficiently for the good of all, North and South. Both parts of the island contribute to the work of the bodies, and both parts gain from it. The work of the bodies is complemented by other initiatives in North-South cooperation. Indeed, long-term economic planning implies the need to consider the whole island for purposes of infrastructural planning. There have been difficulties in the political process, but the common ground achieved by parties as diverse as the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Féin is more remarkable than the set of issues that divides them, and suggests a potential for positive political development in the longer term.

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Bertie Ahern, TD, has been a Fianna Fáil TD since 1977, leader of Fianna Fáil since 1994 and Taoiseach since 1997. He has had a distinguished career in government, having first served as a minister of state in 1982 and as a government minister in 1987. His notable achievements have included negotiating the Good Friday agreement in 1998 and presiding over the final stages of agreeing the European constitution in 2004.

THE FUTURE OF NORTH-SOUTH COOPERATION

Bertie Ahern, TD, Taoiseach

I

The Good Friday Agreement has transformed life on this island. Despite all the difficulties we have faced over the last seven years, it remains the basis for moving forward to finally solve our historic problems.

The great improvement in North-South co-operation has been one of the quiet successes of the Good Friday Agreement. After decades of what has been described as the “great, icy silence”, we can look back on a great thaw. And we look forward to the future knowing that we are building cooperation between North and South as we have never done before.

I applaud this. It makes good sense. We have a lot of time to make up after so many years of neglect and missed opportunity.

II

I would like, at the outset, to pay tribute to the staff of the North/South Ministerial Council Secretariat and of the North-South bodies for the enormous effort they have put in, in difficult circumstances. In particular, I should mention the two Joint Secretaries, Peter Smyth from the North and Tim O'Connor from the South, who have worked tirelessly for the benefit of everyone on this island over many years.

It is not easy to start a new and innovative project at any time, but the years of conflict and silence posed unique challenges. The ongoing political stalemate has presented further challenges.

And yet the bodies have made significant progress. For that, all of the staff and the board members deserve great credit.

It is unfortunate that the bodies have not been able to reach their full potential because of the suspension of the institutions and the interim care and maintenance arrangements. We understand why this has had to be the case but I hope that this unsatisfactory situation can be rectified sooner rather than later. I believe that it is now clear that this would be in everyone's interests.

I also want to thank all of those who have worked to break down the barriers—in the public and private sectors, in trade unions, in the community and voluntary sector and in the academic world.

They are all helping to break the great icy silence.

The North/South dimension is one of the fundamental cornerstones of the balanced political settlement that the Good Friday Agreement represents.

Nationalists accepted the principle of consent. The people of this part of the island endorsed the amendment of Articles 2 and 3 of the Constitution. We also recognised the importance of the East-West dimension to our relationships in these islands.

In return, recognition was given in the Agreement to the realities of history and the relationship between both parts of the island. The institutional arrangements within Northern Ireland have to be balanced by an acceptance, by all sides, of institutions that reflect the identification by Northern nationalists with their fellow Irish citizens in the South.

All the parties in Northern Ireland now recognise that it is impossible to envisage any political accommodation in Northern Ireland that does not have a strong North/South component.

This was clearly evident in the proposals for a comprehensive agreement published by the two governments last December.

For our part, we have always recognised the sensitivities and complexities that surround North-South co-operation. And I hope that we have demonstrated, both in this area and more generally in our handling of the outworking of the Agreement, that we are fair-minded and reasonable.

We are open and transparent in our approach. We have only one agenda. And that agenda is the Agreement itself as endorsed by the people in 1998.

The implementation bodies now directly employ seven hundred people at locations throughout the island from Derry, Belfast and Enniskillen to Dublin, Cork and Carrick-on-Shannon. They have become substantial and purposeful entities addressing clear need and opportunity.

Almost 70 percent of the funding for the North/South Bodies comes from Southern taxpayers. The cost to Northern Ireland in 2005 will be some 37 million pounds sterling.

To give one example, Northern Ireland's contribution to Tourism Ireland's budget this year will be about 14 million sterling. Tourism revenue in Northern Ireland was over 300 million sterling last year, and is growing. In 2004 overseas visitor numbers were up 6% in the North and 3% in the South. This is an excellent return on an investment, by any standards.

Trade is another example. Between 1994 and 2003 North/South trade grew by 35%. InterTradeIreland has developed a wide range of progressive programmes that have been very successful in terms of promoting greater inter-action between businesses North and South. The potential for further growth is enormous. More

importantly, by bringing businesses together, we can all benefit by trading more successfully internationally.

Building a viable relationship between the two jurisdictions is now integral to economic and social life on the island of Ireland. It is in the interest of the people of both parts of the island that Dublin and Belfast co-operate where such co-operation brings practical mutual benefits.

Where joined-up planning and action make sense—and there are many such opportunities—we will pursue them. Where things are best done separately, or in parallel, we have no interest in wasting resources on projects or programmes that do not have real merit.

Our island economy is doing well. But consolidating and assuring this success suggests greater cooperation for the future. This is not a political statement. It is simply common sense.

Europe, and Ireland within Europe, must work even more closely together if we are to keep our peoples at work and our economies thriving. The greatest competition that we face comes not from within the borders of the European Union or this island. It is from further afield—from China, from India and Asia generally. Just as we must focus much more strongly on the competitive threats to the Union as a whole in the global arena, so too must we in Ireland look out for ourselves and all our people by engaging with one another in increasingly imaginative and progressive ways.

In short, we must box clever. We must be smart—and busy—in ensuring that this island does not fall behind. The pressures of the global economy are not standing still. We simply cannot afford to ignore challenges or let opportunities pass us by.

Intensifying co-operation between North and South will not in itself bring solutions to all future challenges. But I am convinced that it will help enormously.

III

My colleague, Brian Cowen, recently called for a wider dialogue and engagement on the possibilities and benefits of an island economy. I fully support that call. I am completely open to any new ideas. Why not pool our thinking, planning and resources to ensure this unprecedented opportunity is exploited to the full? Why not learn from each other?

For example, it has been estimated that over the next ten years the combined spend on infrastructure development on the island will be over 100 billion euro, or 70 billion sterling. This is an extraordinary figure. It presents a real opportunity to work together, for mutual benefit.

The common challenges from international developments are equally striking. Developments in the EU and the WTO have huge implications for farmers, including

trade liberalisation, the new single payments regime and tighter environmental rules.

Our food industry is important and successful, at a time when traditional manufacturing has suffered, especially in the North.

The current EU Budget negotiations are crucial. Our economic success has changed the context. We need to be more imaginative—and self-sufficient—in how we approach national development in the future.

Figures released this week show that the population of the Border Region of the South will be well over half a million by 2021, while that of the entire Border-Midlands-Western (BMW) region will be over 1.3 million. The dependencies between prosperity in that region and neighbouring areas in the North, especially West of the Bann, is clear. It was reflected in my Government's decision to support City of Derry Airport. It calls for more integrated spatial planning and more joined up service provision.

We need to reduce business costs and red tape. That is why we are working towards an all-island energy market and closer co-operation between regulators. More open markets can promote competition and reduce costs, for example in financial services and insurance.

There are so many other areas where what happens in one part of the island impacts on the other part—climate change, protection of the environment, food safety, animal health, telecommunications, the labour market, health, education and R&D are just some examples.

In many areas, there is also a strong East-West dimension. For example, the East-West dimension is fundamental to our policies in aviation, energy and migration.

It is hugely regrettable that the absence of the Assembly and Executive means that locally-elected politicians have been unable to meet their Southern counterparts within the North/South Ministerial Council—as happened successfully some 65 times prior to suspension.

In the absence of devolved government in Northern Ireland, the two Governments have a duty to take necessary decisions in relation to North-South co-operation, with the appropriate democratic oversight.

I look forward to the day when representatives of the Northern Ireland parties are back again around the North/South Ministerial Council table with us. This means all of the prospective parties in the Northern Ireland Executive—the DUP, Sinn Féin, the UUP and the SDLP—working with us on a shared North-South agenda. This is the way it should be. We can achieve so much more by working together as elected politicians, North and South.

IV

The Good Friday Agreement is not only the means through which we can develop and assure political stability in Northern Ireland. It is also the means through which we can promote and develop the prosperity of the entire island for the benefit of everyone. So people should not be surprised that our commitment to the Agreement is rock solid. They should not be surprised when I keep on saying that there is no alternative to the Agreement.

We will work in every way that we can to ensure its full implementation and restore all of its institutions to full operating capacity. This is not just a political mantra. I am saying it because I am entirely convinced of the inescapable logic of the Agreement. I know that the British Government is equally convinced.

And I believe that the vast majority of people on this island know that we have in the Agreement something that is truly unique and that must be protected and preserved. We are not interested in anything less than the Agreement because nothing less will work.

We will not, therefore, settle for half measures that are unsatisfactory in their scope and impact. All energies must be concentrated on the big picture—on the full implementation, as soon possible, of all aspects of the Agreement, including the definitive closure of paramilitarism.

This can happen in the context of a complete end to IRA paramilitarism and criminality and the putting beyond use of their weapons.

Together with the parties, the two Governments spent the whole of last year reviewing the Agreement. We published our proposals on 8 December.

The Review addressed a range of issues across all Strands of the Agreement, including the North-South arrangements. Given all the controversy that subsequently enveloped the process, it is worth recalling now that not only did Sinn Féin agree to the Review proposals, but so too did the DUP.

I regret that the overall initiative did not succeed at that time. But I am entirely convinced that sooner or later we will get there. And we will get there because the broad model of the Good Friday agreement is solid. And most of all it is sensible and fair.

We now need the IRA to deliver a clear and decisive response to Gerry Adams' recent appeal. I hope that this response will be translated into clear reality on the ground. If this happens then we will expect unionism to fully participate in partnership and inclusive politics. Sustaining peace in Northern Ireland is not just about ending violence and criminality. It is also about underwriting justice, equality and parity of esteem.

It may take time but I believe the full potential of the Good Friday Agreement will be realised and become apparent to everyone. I am deeply committed to achieving this end.

Time has been lost and we really cannot afford to lose too much more. We are missing out on opportunities. The sooner we get back to the full agenda of the Agreement and stable restored inclusive institutions, the better it will be for everyone.

I hope that you have a successful day and I commend the Institute for British-Irish Studies for its initiative in arranging this Conference.