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CULTURE AND IDENTITY

Text of speech delivered today by the Secretary of State, Sir
Patrick Mayhew, MP, at the Centre for the Study of Conflict,
University of Ulster at Coleraine.

Wednesday 16 December 1992

"CULTURE AND IDENTITY" - SECRETARY OF STATE'S SPEECH
16 DECEMBER

It is out of conflict that there was born the commitment to political talks that concluded on 10 November. It is a determination to bring an end to conflict that has led the two Governments, and all the participating political parties, to agree that further dialogue is necessary. We cannot as yet be sure whether, let alone when, that dialogue will be achieved. Least certainly of all can we foresee what changes it may bring about.

2. What we can usefully do, however, at this juncture is to reflect upon the nature of the conflict whose consequences have sickened so many in Northern Ireland and beyond, and which it is the insistent demand of so many people here now to leave behind them. It gives me particular pleasure to do so at the centre for the Study of Conflict which has established such a distinguished record of research in this very field.

3. By definition, conflict within a community derives from division. Immediately, the division will be political in character. But conflicting political ambitions generally derive from more deep seated divisions, usually historic in origin. If a community is to be helped to replace conflict with co-operation, those

who presume to influence must first try to identify the nature of the originating divisions. Where conflict has persisted for as long as it has in Ireland, and more particularly in Northern Ireland, the more multifarious are the nuances and shades of opinion, and the more controversial the generalisations, to which such an exercise gives rise. But the exercise is no less necessary.

4. Here then, follow my own observations of the lines by which the community in Northern Ireland is divided. They are scarcely revolutionary, and they do not demarcate into tidily separate compartments: that is part of the trouble. The divisions produce overlapping compartments whose geographical distribution is often not coherent. Nevertheless, viewed from one stand point they represent the fault lines beneath the brittle crust of Northern Ireland, through which primal forces continue to produce eruptions. Viewed in a more hopeful way, however, some at least may be seen as ingredients that can energise beneficially society that is rewardingly rich in its variety.

5. The first and most important line of division separates national identities. The two main groupings are of course those who see themselves primarily as British

and those who see themselves primarily as Irish. Broadly, the first seek to maintain the union with Great Britain; while the second aspire to some form of a united Ireland.

6. The second line separates the two major religious groupings, Catholic and Protestant. The conflict in Northern Ireland, I know, is not primarily about religious differences, although they certainly provide an important ingredient.

7. The third line separates cultural traditions. This difference has a greater importance than has always been acknowledged in the colouring of people's attitudes to society and politics in Northern Ireland.

8. The fourth dividing line derives from the fact that, in the main, it is the minority community in Northern Ireland that suffers more from economic and social disadvantages. It remains generally, but not universally, true that unemployment, not least long-term unemployment, educational under-attainment, poorer housing conditions and other indices of disadvantage, are still relatively more widely to be found in the minority community than the majority.

9. Problems in Northern Ireland require a solution which recognises these divisions. Until fairly recently I think most people would have considered that the divided nature of our society is unique in its character, and that no other society faced anything like such a complex amalgam of conflicting identities and interests. Can anything be like Ireland?

10. Well no, not quite like Ireland. Yet I think it is now increasingly recognised that actually we may be able to draw lessons, in broad terms at least, from the conflicts of others and their resolution, or at least their accommodation.

11. The membership of the European Community shows us that historic conflicts can be resolved through realising that today's common interests actually far outweigh the aftermath of historic differences. The Community has established arrangements which allow for the better pursuit of those interests without sacrificing essential cultural and political identities. The history of the Scandinavian countries bears examination, too. They were not always the harmoniously co-existing trio we are used to.

12. Sadly, however, we can also now see less helpful examples, of which the former Yugoslavia is perhaps only the most striking. There we can see differing national and ethnic allegiances, religious and cultural traditions, erupting into a communal violence which we had come to associate with an earlier age, at least in leafy Europe. All law is set at nought: chaos prevails. This is a hideous warning of which I think many in Northern Ireland have taken heed. And it has perhaps also created a fresh understanding here that, properly understood, 'Brits out' means the ethnic cleansing of a million human beings.

13. I believe that the recent political dialogue, which all the participants in the Talks recognised as desirable and necessary, provides us all with a means to find a solution to our difficulties that is based on the accommodation of differences, not their forceable elimination. There is enormous support in the Northern Ireland community at large for the Talks process.

14. Let me consider first the question of identity and allegiance. My predecessor Peter Brooke in a speech in November 1990 dealt classically with this question. He said that there were two views about the ideal pattern of Government here.

15. First, there is the present reality, in fact and in international law, of the union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, affirmed in the 1973 Constitution Act.

16. We are committed, warmly, solemnly and steadfastly, to honouring our commitment to the wishes of a majority in Northern Ireland. And the Irish Government has endorsed this through its signature of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. The reality is that the identity of unionists is safeguarded in fact, and also in national and international law; it is also recognised as wholly legitimate by constitutional nationalists.

17. But there is also the aspiration to a united Ireland, an aspiration that is no less legitimate. Irish nationalism in its normal constitutional form has produced many fine patriots and advocates, who have enriched both Ireland and other countries too.

18. We can hardly fail to have a profound respect for men like O'Connell, Parnell and Joe Devlin. They attract it not least because of the manner in which they sought to pursue their aims. What attracts no respect, and ought always to attract our condemnation, is the prosecution of the nationalist ideal, or for that matter the unionist ideal, by violence, or by the threat that if you cannot

have your own way regardless of the views of others then you will resort to the gun. Those who kill and maim, claiming that their victims are legitimate targets simply through belonging to a different side of the community, really exhaust the vocabulary of rejection. "An eye for an eye makes us all blind", said Martin Luther King

19. I should like to set out again the approach of the British Government to the aspiration for a united Ireland.

20. The history of the island of Ireland as a whole, you will need no reminding, is in many respects both saddening and uplifting. You will not find me seeking to argue that Britain's role in this island has only ever been associated with what has been up-lifting. On the contrary, there is much in the long and often tragic history of Ireland for deep regret, and the British Government for its part shares in that regret to the full.

21. But that long history of conflict convinces me that an Ireland that were to become united now only by dint of force and coercion, would fall very far short of the true nationalist vision. Such a state would surely meet no true patriot's expectations - and certainly not the vision of Wolfe Tone. Unity cannot be brought one inch nearer, let alone achieved, by dealing out death and destruction.

It is just not sensible to suppose that any British Government will yield to an agenda for Ireland that is pursued by means of violence. Nor would any British government be pressed to do so by any serious body of opinion. Force and coercion have been rejected as has yet again been confirmed in the Republic's recent election, by over 95% of Nationalists within the island of Ireland. Irish Nationalists are generally fair and practical people, who choose to pursue nationalist aims through constitutional means alone.

22. There have been welcome signs that the truth is getting through to some Republicans. There are leading Sinn Fein speakers who voice their wish for a peaceful solution and their desire to follow a constitutional path. Provided it is advocated constitutionally, there can be no proper reason for excluding any political objective from discussion. Certainly not the objective of an Ireland united through broad agreement fairly and freely achieved. But there can be absolutely no question of our dealing, directly or indirectly, with anyone who still espouses violence. The provisional movement has so far excluded itself from discussions, by its devotion to the very methods it has followed. If its cause does have a serious political purpose, then let it renounce

unequivocally the use and threat of violence, and demonstrate over a sufficient period that its renunciation is for real.

23. In the event of a genuine and established cessation of violence, the whole range of responses that we have had to make to that violence could, and would, inevitably be looked at afresh. As my predecessor said two years ago:

"Violence is futile. Violence can never be allowed to succeed. It is, and will remain, the first priority of the Government to defeat terrorism, from whichever side of the community it comes... For so long as violence continues, it will be met with a firm and resolute response. It is of course in the interests of everyone that violence should end now. Just imagine what developments of positive benefit to all sections of the community and both parts of the island of Ireland would be bound to follow a permanent end to violence."

24. Thus, when terrorism is seen to have genuinely ended, there will indeed be profound consequences for the maintenance of law and order, and for the administration of justice. Freed from the threat of death at every corner, the Royal Ulster Constabulary would be free to

give fresh priority to the quality and accessibility of its service. The preventive measures that have been such a necessary part of everyday life in the Province could be relaxed dramatically. The routine support of the armed forces would no longer be required: the army could return to its garrison role, as in the rest of the United Kingdom.

25. To quote my predecessor's Whitbread speech again:

"The United Kingdom has of course no vested interest in maintaining these high force levels a day longer than is necessary ... This kind of high military profile was made necessary by violence, will be maintained as long as there is violence, but will certainly be reduced when violence comes to an end."

Similarly, the emergency legislation on which many of these responses are founded would have served its purpose. Normality could return.

26. With the removal of fear and terrorist oppression, moreover, the whole community would, I believe, quite soon find the confidence and determination to pave the way to political, social and economic betterment, on a scale

which we have not so far experienced. It is entirely consistent with such an ideal that the Government is pledged to return as much responsibility as possible into the hands of local politicians, within a wider framework of stable relationships which, with all concerned, we must work out. It would be designed to ensure that no legitimate grouping is excluded from a fair opportunity to share in the exercise of this responsibility.

27. Equally there must be appropriate expression, in these arrangements, of the identity of each of the two main parts of the community in Northern Ireland. The principles of equality of opportunity, equity of treatment and parity of esteem, already established by the Government, must be upheld and applied. The political development process in which we are engaged seeks the prize of a comprehensive political accommodation, encompassing relationships not only within Northern Ireland but also within the island of Ireland and between the two Governments. This is what the British and Irish Governments and the main constitutional political parties in Northern Ireland have been about all these months. Any such accommodation would of course have to command widespread support within both the Unionist and Nationalist communities. Within it, any new structures

for the Government of Northern Ireland would have to be acceptable to both major traditions.

28. Let me make it entirely clear that within this process the British Government is not guided by any blue print or master plan, leading to some pre-selected constitutional outcome of our choice. We have none. We want to see broad agreement developing, democratically sustained. That is why, 20 years ago now, the 1973 Constitution Act made clear that Northern Ireland's status as part of the UK will not change without the consent of the majority of the people who live there. A majority now quite clearly wishes Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom. It is welcome to do so while that remains the case, welcome to play a full part in the family of people who make up the United Kingdom, welcome to enjoy the benefits and also shoulder the burdens that go with our citizenship.

29. But, as it has equally made clear, Her Majesty's Government would never try to impede any body of opinion in working to achieve a place for Northern Ireland within a united Ireland, provided they work only by democratic and peaceful means. If by such means they were to persuade the greater number of those living in Northern Ireland to agree with them, then Her Majesty's Government

would present no obstacle. All this is indeed well known, and already constitutes a binding obligation upon us.

30. The Government is, therefore, a facilitator of the expression of the democratic will in Northern Ireland. With no self-interest leading it to pursue a separate agenda of its own, the Government is just as plainly the facilitator of the will of the people in Northern Ireland, democratically expressed, as terrorism is its enemy.

31. It falls to the British Government as the sovereign authority, to ensure effective government in Northern Ireland. In doing so, it seeks to ensure that, within the constitutional reality I have described, it operates an administration which recognises the special nature of society here, which places no impediment in the way of the legitimate expression of both identities in Northern Ireland, which promotes equality of opportunity, and provides equity of treatment for all its citizens and whose aim is to build a genuinely tolerant, pluralist society. We are guided in this by the imperative to provide fair, equitable and effective government for all.

32. Here I turn to the divisions in religion and culture. Out of respect for the different attitudes to religion and social values prevalent here, we do not seek

to replicate in Northern Ireland legislation affecting certain areas of personal life which applies in other parts of the United Kingdom. Successive administrations have taken the view, for example over abortion, that the law which applies in England and Wales would not be accepted here.

33. But just as there exist such differences, so surely there exists as well the need for a similarity of approach to the issue of cultural diversity and tolerance. In Great Britain we have a pluralist, multicultural society which on the whole copes tolerantly with tensions. Similarly in Northern Ireland, we hope to promote as far as possible, through Government programmes, mutual respect for the different cultures that flourish here. I am particularly grateful to the Community Relations Council and Cultural Traditions Group for the invaluable work they do in encouraging people here to understand and respect the traditions and values of others.

34. The Irish language literary tradition, for example, goes at least as far back as the English, has a wealth of imaginative writing and art which is rightly treasured. One thinks, for example, of the epic sagas of Cuchulainn and Maeve. And of course this wealth that resides in Gaelic literature is reflected gloriously in the writings

in the English language of Yeats, Shaw, Synge and in the work of O'Casey and Joyce among many others. The world owes a great debt to Irish culture.

35. But, Irish culture in its turn draws on its proximity to Britain. It is interesting to note how a commitment to even extreme republicanism and Gaelic culture has not in the past been found incompatible with admiration for the riches of the English language. I recently learned how the letters of an IRA leader of the 1920s, Ernie O'Malley, warmly recognise the cultural riches of the very country against which he had just been fighting with such determination. The cultural achievements of each country draw on and enrich the other. There is therefore no place in anyone's thinking for cultural superiority, let alone hegemony. I share Roy Foster's hope, expressed in a lecture in 1989, for a day when cultural difference no longer implies political confrontation.

36. I fully understand, therefore, the importance that many in the nationalist community in particular rightly attach to Irish culture, and perhaps to the Irish language and Gaelic games especially. In a mature and tolerant society there should be ample scope for the development of different cultural expression, which does not pose a

threat to, or express itself in hostility towards, those of a different tradition, but which will enrich society as a whole through increasing enjoyment of its very diversity. That will, I hope, mean that those who have already discovered the wealth of Gaelic culture and games will be ready to share it freely within the whole community.

37. The Government has, accordingly, decided that we should take some new positive steps in relation to the Irish language. About 10% of the population of Northern Ireland know Irish. There is already, of course, widespread teaching of the language and, where this can be viable, some schooling through the medium of Irish.

38. The Government puts no bar on citizens writing to public sector bodies in Irish, though the reply will continue to be in English, and likewise we expect official forms to be completed in English. The Government provides direct funding to several Irish language bodies, perhaps notably the Ultach Trust, whose aim is to promote appreciation and knowledge of the language. Broadcasting organisations provide some programmes in Irish, and I would myself expect this to increase.

39. We have been active in facilitating the promotion of the Irish language, and we are anxious to remove any structural barriers to its use by those who wish to do so. I am therefore very pleased to announce that we are committed to remove as soon as practicable the legislation which prohibits streetnames in any language other than English. This will not, of course, mean that each street will have dual-language names. But it will mean that, where there is local demand, streetnames in Irish could be erected alongside the English name.

40. The removal of barriers to the Irish language is not intended to be at the expense of the position of English. Of course not. We have no plans for a bilingual society. But, as in other fields, what we are about is working to the agenda of the people of Northern Ireland, not pursuing any interests of our own.

41. The fourth line of division - in the economic field - is in many ways much harder to tackle. All of Northern Ireland needs a boost to its economic performance. That is why public expenditure per capita here is so substantially higher than in any other part of the United Kingdom, and is likely to remain so despite the tight constraints within which United Kingdom public expenditure must now be controlled. But there are areas of

disadvantage within Northern Ireland itself which mark them out as suffering more severe problems than other areas.

42. It is the case that many Protestant areas suffer problems at least as great as Catholic areas, in housing, educational attainment, unemployment and so on. And an inadequate home, leaving school without a qualification and being without a job, affect a Protestant just as seriously as a Catholic. It is an easy assumption to make from outside Northern Ireland that only Catholics suffer economic and social disadvantage. Those living here know better. That is why our Targeting Social Need programme is precisely what it proclaims: it seeks to tackle needs wherever they manifest themselves, irrespective of locality. Tackling disadvantage is not a game played in favour of one side of the community and at the expense of the other. Our aim is to give everyone an equal opportunity.

43. It remains the case, however, that disadvantage, measured in terms of unemployment, housing, education, ill-health, etc, continues overall to bear more heavily on the Catholic community as a whole. There are complex reasons for this, which have their roots deep in the past. Enduring solutions are unlikely to prove simple or

rapid. But we are committed to targeting Government programmes - in industrial and agricultural strengthening, education, training, housing, health, for example - on those areas where problems and needs are greatest, under the Targeting Social Needs programme.

44. Examples of this are to be found in our increasingly effective focus on the disadvantaged parts of Belfast, whether Catholic, Protestant or mixed, under the Making Belfast Work Initiative; and its counterpart in Londonderry. And we have also mounted the Rural Development initiative to tackle areas of particular disadvantage in the rural economy. To the extent that, as the statistics reveal, more Catholics come into the category of the disadvantaged, their community may initially draw greater benefit. Again, our aim here is not to promote one community at the expense of the other. What we seek to do is to create a level launching pad for all the people of Northern Ireland.

45. Likewise, where public funding arrangements differentially affect the two communities, we seek to avoid creating, however unintentionally, any disadvantage. In education, for example, just as in England and Wales, the Catholic Church and others have made extensive use of the legislative arrangements for

voluntary schools. These have permitted the school trustees to retain a particular ethos and identity. This means that they retain a majority control of their Boards of Governors, but in return they have to make a 15% contribution to capital expenditure.

46. It is entirely right that such arrangements exist. But it is equally clear that the 15% contribution represents a major burden in some areas - and particularly in those areas which have multiple social need. This may well delay necessary expenditure, and could have the effect of disadvantaging some pupils as well as impinging differentially on one section of the community in its overall effect. I am therefore delighted that we have agreed with all voluntary school authorities that schools which are prepared to make management changes, so that no single grouping holds a majority on the Board of Governors, will receive 100% capital grant.

47. The same objective can be seen in our commitment to fair employment, as enshrined in the 1989 Act. We recently set out how we plan to review its operation and all the other factors which bear on equality of opportunity. The aim again is not a pre-determined outcome in favour of one grouping or another, but genuine

equality of opportunity and a healthier and more prosperous society as a result.

48. In sum, then, the Government is wholly committed to a fair, equitable society where the sharp edges that constitute injustice may at least be taken off its dividing lines. We have made a lot of progress, despite the negative impact of violence which has undoubtedly inhibited advance towards greater equality. More, undoubtedly, remains to be done within the resources available to us. But the ideal of a tolerant, pluralist society where all legitimate aims, aspirations and forms are respected, is one I hope we can all strive for: a society where political difference would be regulated by debate and not the gun.

49. It is sometimes said that the return of power to new local institutions would merely mean that decisions now taken by Englishmen would in future be taken by Ulstermen. That, I suggest, is to misunderstand both our intentions and the nature of society here.

50. As Britons we may seek to ensure fair play as best we can. We may seek to encourage in directions of tolerance and generosity. But a real resolution of the divisions of society can be found, I suggest, only by

those who have first-hand experience of them, who know the hearts of their fellow-countrymen and women, who know what they can and cannot accept. Only an accommodation hammered out on a local anvil, and with widespread local support, will survive the tests of time and practice.

51. It is for that reason that I sought to ensure in the recent Talks that the role of the British Government was one of facilitating, not steering in a particular predetermined direction. Any arrangements which flow from dialogue between the main constitutional parties, and the British and Irish Governments, will need to pass the test of widespread acceptability. They will need to provide public services effectively and fairly, and be likely to endure healthily and robustly, so as to give good governance to all the people of Northern Ireland.

52. Northern Ireland deserves and receives parity of services with other regions of the UK in return for parity of taxation. Given the problems of the economy and society here, this requires a level of public expenditure well above the capacity of the Province to generate public revenue. The Exchequer, as it does with some other British regions, therefore subsidises public expenditure here - by over £2 billion a year. This we are happy to

do, but it scarcely amounts to the actions of a government which is motivated by gaining economic advantage to Great Britain.

53. Likewise the market on the island of Ireland as a whole is not such as to sustain any wider, vaguer plan to help open doors for British companies and goods, through preservation of the Union and payment of a continued subsidy to public expenditure here, as some have seemed to suggest. Even if that were ever so, the emergence of a Single European Market in a fortnight's time opens up all of the markets of the European Community member states to each other's firms, irrespective of location. So neither from the perspective of national finances nor for the sake of British companies is the Government here.

54. The future of Northern Ireland, the resolution of the divisions which mark its society, and the nature of future government institutions here, are all in the hands of the people of Northern Ireland.

55. It is for political and community leaders here to take the development of a fair and tolerant society further, where one group's self-expression is not seen as a threat to another group, where compromise is the common coin of politics, and where equality of opportunity and equity of treatment are the experience of all sections of society.

56. Talks between the main constitutional parties, the British and Irish Governments are the gateway to that sort of future for Northern Ireland. We aim to enable the people of Northern Ireland to reach that sort of future: to achieve a society characterised by fairness and debate, not scarred by violence and destruction.

57. In that endeavour we intend to persevere.