
Address to the Members of the
Northern Ireland Assembly
by the Prime Minister,
the Rt Hon Gordon Brown MP

Thursday 18 September 2008

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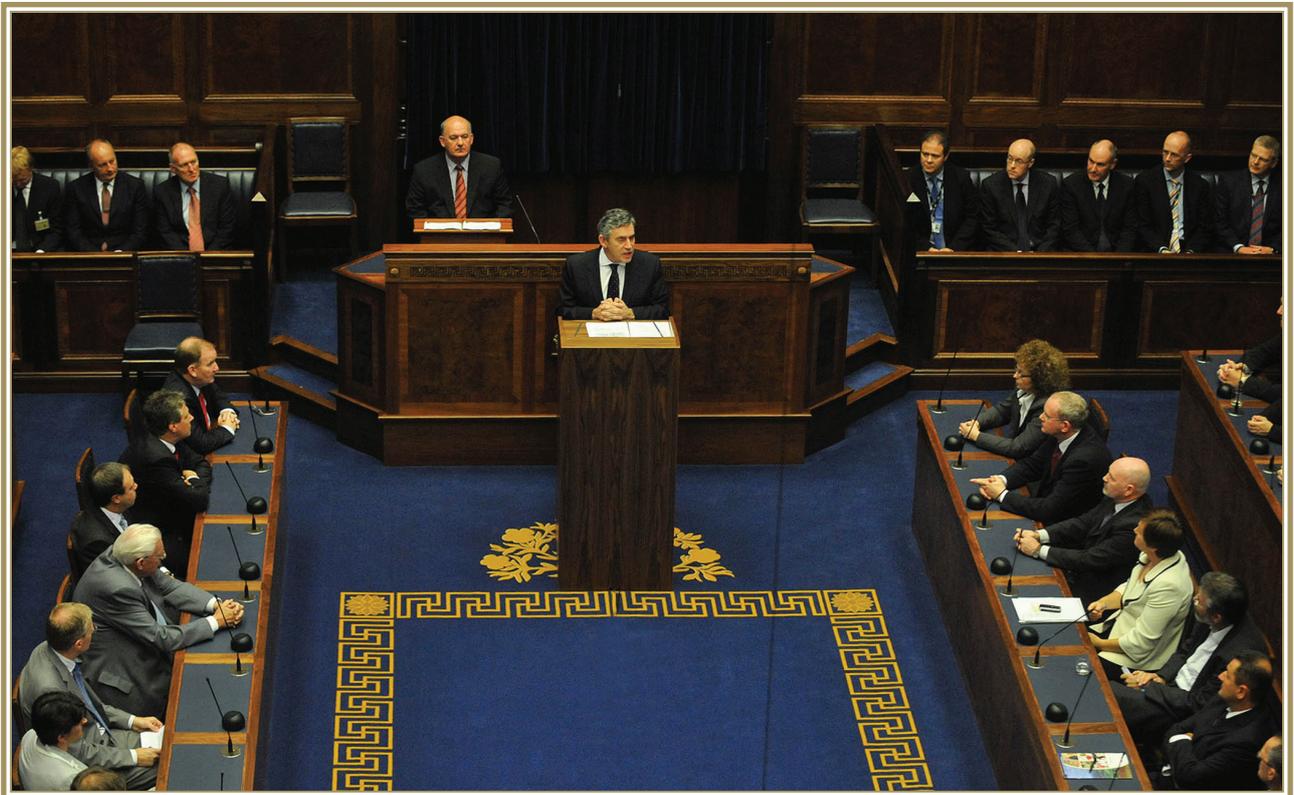
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NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

ADDRESS BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE RT HON GORDON BROWN MP

Mr Speaker: One of the most enjoyable aspects of the job of Speaker of this Assembly is that of welcoming the many visitors who come to Parliament Buildings, and I am delighted that there are so many.

In recent years, Members of the Assembly have enjoyed opportunities to listen to addresses from the First Ministers of Scotland and of Wales. This afternoon, it gives me great pleasure to welcome to Parliament Buildings the Prime Minister, the Rt Hon Gordon Brown MP. Members will be aware, of course, that this is not the Prime Minister's first visit to Parliament Buildings, but it is, Prime Minister, the first time that you have had the opportunity to address formally the Members of the Assembly in a gathering such as this. I am delighted that the Prime Minister has accepted my invitation to do so. I now call upon you, sir, to address the Members.

The Prime Minister (The Rt Hon Gordon Brown MP): Mr Speaker, Members of the Assembly, it is an honour and a privilege to be in Stormont to address the elected Members of this fully representative, power-sharing Administration and Assembly; to be here with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the Minister of State; and to be the first Prime Minister to do so. It is also a humbling experience, because for all the cynicism about politics today, all of you are living proof that politics can win through and that public service can make a huge difference.

So, let me say at the outset that the reason that Northern Ireland today commands respect from all around the world is because politicians — and that means all the elected representatives in this Assembly — have shown that the political path to peaceful change, while it can be difficult, is the only way from conflict to a stable and secure future and that however great the divisions, dialogue can move us from ancient battlegrounds to new common ground. Because the measure of the strength of our new politics here is that

in difficult times we renew our efforts, go back to the table and we find a way through. That is what you and this Assembly are showing to the whole world.

In the old BBC, in the days before World War II, when it was time for the nine o'clock news, sometimes the announcer would simply say, "There is no news tonight". Some of us may be happy for those days to return, but the good news here is that there is so little of the old news. After decades of conflict, you are on an entirely different path; no longer the ever-present threat of violence and the uncertainties of what might happen at the supermarket, at the petrol station or in the city centre. Together you have transformed, and are transforming, this society, and that is a momentous, a historic, achievement.

I want to acknowledge the contributions of Members represented here today and the historic contribution of Tony Blair, Bertie Ahern, Bill Clinton, the First Minister and deputy First Minister, the former First Minister here and so many others. It would be invidious to select any one of you here individually; all of you have worked for the changes that have been brought about. Many have worked to make real the idea of a new Northern Ireland. Our Government and the Governments of the Republic, led by Brian Cowen, and the United States, led by George Bush, continue to be pledged to that ideal.

For Northern Ireland — once more and now more than ever — the outcome is in your hands, but what the politics of Northern Ireland has proved is that hope can triumph over fear. Northern Ireland is no longer a byword for endless, corrosive despair, but a beacon of promise for the future to all parts of the world: a Northern Ireland increasingly at peace with itself; a Northern Ireland of rising prosperity and cohesion. What you have done here — and are still doing and have still to do — is indeed an inspiration for the whole world. You are showing that the light can come to the darkest places when people are empowered to take control of their destiny and decide to change it for ever.

All around I see a new sense of confidence and achievement. Over the past decade, Northern Ireland has delivered one of the highest rates of growth of any UK region outside London and the south-east of England. We have seen businesses attracted here by competitive operating costs, excellent transport links and world-class skills. We have seen, of course, in recent days that the instability in global financial markets is affecting every major economy in the world. The financial turbulence that started in the US has now spread to some of the biggest institutions on Wall Street. This is the first crisis of the truly globalised economy, and those twin shocks of the credit crunch and inflationary pressures — particularly in oil — that are hitting every country in the world will require new international as well as domestic solutions.

Of course, given the importance of financial services to our whole economy, neither the United Kingdom nor any part of it can be insulated from those global financial shock waves. And, as we have seen again this morning, like all the major economies, we are also being hit by the inflationary impact over the past couple of years of higher global commodity prices, and that has a direct effect on the family budgets of all your constituents.

However, because of the five fundamental strengths of our economy — low inflation and therefore low interest rates; flexible labour markets; the financial strength of our industrial companies; public debt repayments over the past decade that mean that we can prudently increase government borrowing at the right time; and the long-term decisions we are taking on planning, energy and our national infrastructure — we are better placed than we have been in the past to cope with and to weather this global downturn.

At home, we have taken action to help households through this difficult period, including tough decisions on public sector pay; support through the New Deal; a £120 family tax cut for basic rate taxpayers; and targeted support for the housing market. We will continue to strengthen depositor protection in the banking system.

We will also continue to use our experience to lead international work on those issues that can be tackled only at the global level. This summer, we worked with Saudi Arabia to focus urgent global attention on the oil market. Since their peak, oil prices are down by more than a third, though we continue to work with our international partners to get to affordable oil prices.

Global problems require global action. Yesterday, I discussed with President Sarkozy the need for Europe to play a stronger role in stabilising the world economy. In New York next week, I will meet with world leaders to discuss the reforms that we are now proposing to the global financial architecture. I will call for more transparency to reduce uncertainty; a better early-warning system for global investors, including a stronger role for the International Monetary Fund; and better co-ordination between financial regulators, building on the reforms we have already made. We will continue to do whatever is necessary. To build more momentum for those reforms, the Government will send senior representatives to meet all G7 countries in the run-up to the International Monetary Fund meeting and will continue to do whatever is necessary to keep our economy moving forward and to maintain the integrity of our financial institutions.

As the fundamentals of Northern Ireland's economy remain strong, I believe that you have powerful reasons for optimism. Last year, you had one of the lowest unemployment rates of any part of the United Kingdom. Today, you have more people in work than ever before.

Because you have ensured that the politics of peace has prevailed over violence, you have also made possible a new era of international investment in Northern Ireland.

In the past, because of the violence and the conflict, investment here was too often seen as risky. When investment did take place, it was despite the Troubles, but today you are able to reap huge benefits from international investment. The world's financial services and manufacturing companies see Northern Ireland as equal to — or even better than — the best places to invest.

In May this year, I was delighted to speak at the investment conference that you organised brilliantly here in Belfast. More than a hundred executives from the United States were drawn here by the opportunities in Northern Ireland. We saw companies like Bloomberg vote with their dollars and make their investments. We are seeing existing investments grow rapidly from Marriott International; the New York Stock Exchange; and, most recently, as I have seen this afternoon, Bombardier. We know the immediate impact of that conference alone — and the enthusiasm that you generated — was over £80 million of new investment in Northern Ireland. Invest Northern Ireland has received over 40 expressions of interest from overseas, which it is currently following up.

I remember meeting with the CEO of Bombardier at Hillsborough and talking through with him the work being done to attract resources for work on a new passenger jet here in Belfast. I watched with pride the deal being announced in July at Farnborough — in this, Shorts' centenary year — with over 800 jobs secured and the first orders already being placed by Lufthansa.

Earlier this afternoon, I visited Bombardier and met some of those whose skills will lead Northern Ireland into the future: apprentices, who are now being taken on in record numbers for recent years, and those who qualified through the Engineering Skills for Industry programme, which has helped 130 people into sustainable employment in Belfast. I met pupils from local schools being introduced to aerospace through Bombardier's educational outreach programme. Progress like this is possible only because of the skills, enterprise and dynamism of the people of Northern Ireland and the investment of business as a result of your efforts.

You are superbly placed to compete and lead in the new global economy, which is set to double in size over the next two decades. You have a wealth of talent and the capacity to build a strong knowledge-based private sector around your universities. You have a strong business climate and the will to win in the global

economy. So the peace dividend in Northern Ireland grows day by day, year after year, every year of peace.

Now is not the time for Northern Ireland to rest on its laurels or retreat but rather to redouble its efforts and to invest in what matters most for the future: world-class education and skills. That is a challenge that I know you will meet, because I know what you have done already. I am confident that with the strength of leadership we have all witnessed over the past year, the prosperity of Northern Ireland, even in difficult global times, will endure and expand in the years ahead.

Of course, the economic strength of Northern Ireland depends, crucially, on its political stability. The Independent Monitoring Commission report of two weeks ago made it crystal clear that the IRA is not the danger; that the army council is redundant; that the military structures have been disbanded and consciously allowed to fall into disuse; and that the PIRA, as an organisation, does not pose a terrorist threat.

As all Northern Ireland knows, the end to violence marked the beginning of prosperity. The continued success in preventing violence is the precondition of continued growth.

We have seen, in the last nine months, a series of attacks on police officers. There are criminal elements that must be confronted with the utmost determination, and that is exactly what will happen. And let me say to all those brave men and women, the officers from both communities who form the police family: you have our gratitude for the sacrifices you make, for your strength in the face of danger and for your determination to protect the people of Northern Ireland. The criminals who have targeted you have done so because they have much to fear from democracy backed by proper and effective policing.

So let us send an unequivocal message to those who would defy the will of the people: the politics of peaceful change is winning in Northern Ireland and will overcome whatever obstacles are put in its way.

The clearest sign that democracy will triumph is the success of this Assembly and the Executive working together, meeting together, fulfilling all their functions, carrying out all their duties on behalf of the people who elected them and completing the process of devolution.

What you have achieved to date is historic, not least in the unique joint and equal leadership of the First and deputy First Ministers. Some thought that power sharing between the parties would never happen and that the burden of shared government would be too heavy. No one ever assumed that it would be easy. The cynics, with their doubts and misgivings, have, at every turn, been proved wrong by you. You have made history, but I believe that you have more history to make.

We can see in the research from the past week the extent of the public support for the completion of the transfer of policing and justice powers. Across the community, according to the research, the majority of people wants to see this accomplished. Less than one in 10 says never. I can only hope that even this small minority will eventually come to see that completing devolution is not only the right thing to do, but the only thing to do.

I believe that it would be wrong to allow that small minority to exercise a veto on further progress now. Yes, let us understand their concerns, but let us also agree that they cannot and will not call a halt to progress. So I urge you to continue your crucial work in this Executive and Assembly, to finish the job and to complete a journey not just of a generation, but of centuries.

I believe that we have gone beyond our crossroads in history. This is no time to turn back or to stall or delay. The completion of devolution is much more than the final step in a process: it is the creation of a whole new permanent future for Northern Ireland. To falter now, to lose the will that has defined your progress, would be worse than a setback; it would put at risk everything that has been achieved by the work and sacrifice of the past decade and more.

My message to you today is to have confidence, to stay the course, to continue your work and to reach that final settlement. Show the world the peace and prosperity that you have achieved is definitively here to stay. If you make this commitment, then we in the British Government will match your resolve and do everything within our power to support you in it. We have not only prepared the ground for the transfer, but we stand ready to help you through a smooth transition.

We pledged in the St Andrews Agreement that we would be ready to transfer powers one year after the Assembly was elected. We have kept that promise. So now leaders here in Northern Ireland must reach agreement between themselves and set the date for the transfer of policing and justice from the Secretary of State to a justice Minister in, and of, Northern Ireland.

None of us should doubt the importance of this. In the agreement you reach here among yourselves, in the transfer of these powers back from Westminster, the world will see you affirm that stability is here to stay, that peace is here to stay, that prosperity is here to stay.

When President Bush came to Northern Ireland earlier this year, he did so not only because he is a true friend of the people of this country, but because he wanted to see the huge inward investments from America continue to flow to the benefit of the people of Northern Ireland. When I spoke to him a few days ago and told him that I was coming here, he again talked movingly about his visit and about his

commitment to you and all the people of Northern Ireland. His message to everyone on every side was clear: it is time to complete devolution, not just for yourselves but because that is the signal investors need to see. It is the best safeguard for the investment that has been made, and will be made in the future, from America.

I know that that commitment is shared by Senator McCain and Senator Obama because I have talked to both of them. So whoever becomes the next President of the United States is resolved to help in the process, and they are right to do so, and not just because of the economic impact, nor even because of the political consequences, as important as they are for the future of your people. There is something more vital at stake for your entire society, something that only the completion of devolution can deliver. How can you, as an Assembly, address common criminality, low-level crime and youth disorder when you are responsible for only some of the levers for change, and when you have responsibility for education, health and social development but have to rely on Westminster for policing and justice?

The people of Northern Ireland look to you to deal with these matters because to them they are important. Full devolution is the way to deliver better services, tailored to the needs of all communities, regardless of the politics. It is the best way for you to serve them. My mission is to help you to deliver for them and for future generations in Northern Ireland. My job is to be there for you; to refuse to give in or give up; and to reach with you the shared destiny and your shared hopes.

As we stand at this point, and as you take those decisions that will shape the future of your nation, I am reminded of the poem by the American writer Robert Frost, who wrote:

“Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.”

Today I say to you: have faith that if you take the road less travelled, it will make all the difference. Have faith that your hopes will be rewarded; that while the arc of the moral universe may be long — and it has been so long here in Northern Ireland — it bends towards peace and justice. I have faith that the people of Northern Ireland, and indeed people around the world, are with you, and always will be.

Let us together show the people of Northern Ireland and, indeed, the people of the world that the astonishing transformation of Northern Ireland can be completed and that the future of Northern Ireland is in the right hands because it is in your hands.

Thank you.

[Applause.]

Mr Speaker: Once again, Prime Minister, on behalf of all the Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly, I thank you very much for taking time out of a very busy schedule to be with us here this afternoon. Thank you, Prime Minister.

