
Interview: Dick Spring

Prospects for peace and development in Ireland

On Sept. 30, *EIR* was invited to an exclusive interview session with Ireland's Foreign Minister Dick Spring. Mr. Spring had just concluded meetings with Clinton administration officials and, despite the Haitian crisis being at its climax, President Clinton also took time out to briefly meet with him. *EIR*'s Webster Tarpley and Mary Jane Freeman were among seven journalists at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington. Due to technical difficulties, a verbatim transcript was not made. What follows are Mr. Spring's opening remarks and answers to questions, based on the reporters' notes.

Spring: I have brought a message to Washington: There is optimism and hope. This is the most remarkable thing to occur on the island in 25 years and it is holding, despite the risks and provocations. Good things are happening. The Loyalists must enter the debates and reciprocate. There is nothing to fear in the process. We look to hold the Irish Forum for Peace and Development by the end of October or early November. We welcome the Unionists, but at this moment it doesn't look likely. The Forum affords all parties an opportunity to come into Democratic politics. The Downing Street Declaration provides the framework for this process to move forward. There is a window of opportunity in Anglo-Irish relations and it should be seized.

I would like to comment on our economy. Formally, we are doing well; we experienced the highest rate of growth in a long time. Officially our growth rate was 4% last year and we are expecting 5% next year. Our inflation rate averaged 3% over the recent years and unemployment was down for the first time in memory. The outlook is good in the future. In the wake of peace there is hope for investment. Northern Ireland can expect an economic boost by a climate of peace. The European Union is moving forward and expanding. It will soon include three Nordic countries, Austria, then eastern Europe. Political and economic stability in eastern Europe is necessary. We have already concluded signed accords with Poland and Hungary as well as an economic agreement with Russia.

EIR asked Spring if Ireland endorses the European infrastructure development plan of European Commission president Jacques Delors, which has projects for Ireland.

Spring: "We want to move ahead with it." Ireland bene-

fits from its membership in the European Union. We, like the other peripheral countries, Greece, Spain, Portugal, make great use of the structural cohesion funds of the EU [European Union]. Ireland is a land with no link to the continent. We must build ferry links and air services. We are an export-dependent nation. Less than 30% of our exports go to the United Kingdom now, whereas prior to 1973 over 60% went to the U.K. Ireland is Britain's fifth largest trading partner; bigger than Australia and New Zealand.

EIR asked if building maglev trains has been considered.

Spring (jokingly): If you brought our rails up to that level, the island would pass by too quickly—you'd be at the other end before you blinked. We have to open our border crossings and modernize our existing rails. There are 16 roads that have now re-opened. We need north-south road construction. One peace dividend will be new rails and roads from Belfast to Dublin. Northern Ireland is very beautiful and if peace can be secured tourism will blossom there, as Belfast is rich with history. We will need flagship projects such as industrial parks that straddle the border.

Using the analogy of Haiti, a reporter asked which must come first: an end to the violence or economic aid?

Spring: Security comes first. Once we stop the violence we know we must back it up with economic development. The International Fund for Ireland will play an important role in this. Investors will only consider putting their monies into Ireland if the violence has ceased.

EIR asked how realistic are Sinn Fein's demands to demilitarize Northern Ireland.

Spring: Sinn Fein must accept the realities of the moment. The Republicans want the British out, but the result will not be a United Ireland, at least not in the short haul. There must be Anglo-Irish talks and we must develop north-south relations. For now, we will not have political unity until we can have open borders between the north and south of Ireland. Now we have two different countries. Our borders are currently highly militarized. If we eliminate the violence, then the borders can become porous, as in all other European countries. So security is first and economic development is second.

A reporter asked about Sinn Fein president Gerry Adams's leadership.

Spring: He seems to be personally in control. He has succeeded in bringing the Sinn Fein and IRA together. There is a huge expectation of him. The question is, can he deliver.

Responding to questions on the timeframe for the peace process:

Spring: We are hoping to convene the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation in early November. The Democratic left is participating, although at this time the Unionists are not. The Forum will help to expose the Sinn Fein to the democratic process in the South. The purpose of the Forum is to bring together all the parties and to put on the table everyone's views and demands.

From this we then can put together a framework document between the two governments defining the terms of reference from which to proceed. It is hoped that we will have this framework document by Christmastime. But the Unionists are nervous and want to go slow. In this regard, President Clinton and Vice President Gore's outreach to the Protestants is very critical. Leaders from the Unionist Party were here in the United States last week and this is very important. You must realize that after 25 years of direct rule, the Protestants of Northern Ireland want their share of the governing. The government of Ireland has a healthy relationship with the Unionists, Mr. Molyneux; although Mr. Paisley is a different kettle of fish.

He was asked whether Ireland has been discussing economic aid with Clinton administration officials.

Spring: The International Fund for Ireland established in 1986 out of the Anglo-Irish Agreement is an important vehicle in this regard. The United States already contributes to the fund. A Washington, D.C. conference on investment prospects would be a very good idea. Right now 40,000 jobs in Ireland are dependent on U.S. investments. U.S. investors get a very high rate of return on their investments here.

He was asked if Ireland would accept loans for development purposes from some of the traditional financial institutions.

Spring: No. We do not want to rush into any loans. In keeping with the Maastricht guidelines we are reducing our national debt. We have just gotten it down to 98% of Gross Domestic Product, whereas it had been 120% of GDP.

He was questioned on the American role in the peace process and whether the Clinton administration is doing enough to get the Loyalists into the process.

Spring: We are very, very satisfied with what the Clinton administration is doing. President Clinton has been courageous and is personally engaged in solving the problem. We are very grateful. From the start, the administration has worked with both sides in the conflict. The President has had

the wisdom of Solomon and the patience of Job.

He was asked what he and President Clinton discussed when Spring met him at Martha's Vineyard on Sept. 2. Were any numbers discussed in terms of U.S. aid?

Spring: You mean besides our golf handicaps? There has not been any discussion of hard and fast dollar amounts. We are exploring options with the administration. An inter-agency group has been set up within the Clinton administration which is studying investment and aid options for Ireland. Weekly meetings have been ongoing.

EIR asked, in light of the potential in the Middle East for lasting peace based upon economic development projects, how would he see using this model and incorporating the development perspective into the government's current economic plan which had been written prior to the latest developments in Northern Ireland?

Spring: Amazing things are happening. The Berlin Wall has come down. There are horrific consequences from not seizing the opportunity in eastern Europe. There is an evolution in political thinking going on. Just look at South Africa, the Middle East, and Cambodia. The peace process is well on its way in Cambodia. Northern Ireland has experienced 25 years of violence. The 1992 Warrington bombing sent shockwaves through the population. The futility of violence is clear.

There was a question on how he sees the peace process with regard to the uniting of North and South Ireland.

Spring: I would expect that a plebiscite within ten years could be held in which the future status would be determined. We must build cross-community support. A referendum at this time is not realistic. We need a new political agreement.

EIR asked him what he thought of President Clinton's July trip to Germany where he declared a new partnership with Germany and an end to the special relationship with Britain.

Spring: The reunification of Germany has necessarily required that all nations establish stronger ties with Germany. Germany is the powerhouse of the European Union and we work closely with them. The special relationship between Britain and the United States has always been there and I don't think it is over. But there has also been a special relationship between Ireland and the United States for many years. There is a strong Irish-American lobby.

A reporter asked him what is the Irish government's position on Gerry Adams's visa to the United States.

Spring: It is not a matter of a British or Dublin position. It is a position of the American administration. President Clinton broke new ground and sent a clear message to the Sinn Fein that his administration wants to facilitate peace negotiations.