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Text as delivered by An Taoiseach at 10.30 a.m. on 13.3.74, in Dáil Éireann.

Statement on status of Northern Ireland, made in Dáil Éireann, on Wednesday, 13th March, 1974, by An Taoiseach, Mr. Liam Cosgrave, T.D.

At the Sunningdale Conference the following declarations were made:

The Irish Government fully accepted and solemnly declared that there could be no change in the status of Northern Ireland until a majority of the people of Northern Ireland desired a change in that status.

The British Government solemnly declared that it was, and would remain, their policy to support the wishes of the majority of the people of Northern Ireland. The present status of Northern Ireland is that it is part of the United Kingdom. If in the future the majority of the people of Northern Ireland should indicate a wish to become part of a united Ireland, the British Government would support that wish.

The Government are aware that their declaration has been the subject of some controversy and that misconceptions have arisen in relation to it. The Government were advised that as the declaration was the subject of legal proceedings firstly in the High Court and later on appeal to the Supreme Court it would not be proper for them to comment on the matters that had been raised until the issues ceased to be sub judice. The judgments in the Supreme Court have now been delivered and the Government are glad of the opportunity which is thus afforded to them to clarify misunderstandings and correct certain misconceptions.

All the parties at the Sunningdale Conference were fully aware of the divergent political attitudes which were represented at the Conference. They were concerned, however, not to accentuate those divergences, but to find ways to bring about accord in this island. With this end in view, each Government in making its declaration was concerned to assist in the process of reconciliation which the Conference was endeavouring to promote.

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Instead of indulging in essentially arid and potentially divisive arguments as to the rights and wrongs of historic events now long past, the Irish Government considered that they should concern themselves with the present and look to the future, and see how best they could serve the common cause of securing peace and justice in Northern Ireland. The Government were well aware that differences exist in the constitutional law of the Republic of Ireland and of the United Kingdom as to the status of Northern Ireland but they considered that it would not be helpful to debate those constitutional differences.

They considered that peace and progress could best be secured by allaying fears which, however unjustified the Government felt them to be, were nonetheless very real. Their object, therefore, in making their solemn declaration to the Conference was to reassure those in the majority community of Northern Ireland who were apprehensive of the new institutions which were being created - the power sharing Executive and the Council of Ireland. The Government, therefore, declared that there could be no change in the status of Northern Ireland until a majority of the people of Northern Ireland desired a change in that status. The declaration was, of course, referring to the de facto status of Northern Ireland, that is to say the factual position, to which reference is made in recent judgments in the High Court and the Supreme Court. The factual position of Northern Ireland is that it is within the United Kingdom and my Government accept this as a fact.

I now therefore solemnly reaffirm that the factual position of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom cannot be changed except by a decision of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland. This declaration, I

believe, is in accordance with and follows from the resolve of all the democratic parties in the Republic that the unity of Ireland is to be achieved only by peaceful means and by consent.

The declarations of the Irish and British Governments, and the arrangements agreed at Sunningdale, will be incorporated in a formal agreement to be signed at the formal stage of the Conference. This formal agreement will be brought before the Dáil and registered with the United Nations.

I believe that what I have said here today represents the view of this House. I hope it will also be heard across political and community divisions by all who want to see an end for ever to conflict and dissension in any part of Ireland.

All of us who live today in the island of Ireland have inherited an immensely difficult and complex problem which has brought suffering and death to innocent men and women in each generation. It is a problem which no previous generation in our history - whatever else it may have achieved - was able to resolve. The way is open to us who live in Ireland at this particular time to begin to resolve it. The House can be assured that this work, pursued in recent years, will be carried forward by my Government with energy and resolution.