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Meeting between the Taoiseach and the British Prime
Minister in London on 6th November, 1981.

Statement by the Taoiseach in Dail Eireann
on 10th November, 1981.

It is my duty to report to the House on the discussions that took place in London on Friday last between representatives of the Irish Government, including the Tanaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs as well as myself, and representatives of the British Government, including the Prime Minister, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and the Secretary of State for Energy.

Recalling the expressed wish of the leader of the Opposition when Taoiseach, that a right of reply should be accorded to the Taoiseach when statements of this kind are made, I proposed to the Leader of the Opposition yesterday that I should be given the opportunity to reply to his remarks, but he was not agreeable to this procedure.

It would have been open to me in these circumstances to have substituted for a statement a brief debate, in which I would have had such a right of reply, following the precedent set by my predecessor on two recent occasions. However I decided that I would not follow these precedents, in view of the possibility that such a debate, however, brief, might raise

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unnecessary controversy and operate against the national interest. Rather than risk the damage that this might do, I have preferred to forego the right of reply to which I would have been entitled in such a debate.

I also proposed to the Leader of the Opposition yesterday that an independent Deputy should be allowed to make a contribution for a maximum period of ten minutes, but the Leader of the Opposition also refused to agree to this procedure. I have to accept this on the present occasion but I propose to have raised in the Committee of Procedure and Privileges when it is appointed the matter of a contribution by an Independent to a statement of this kind.

I have to say at the outset that I regret that the Leader of the Opposition should have chosen to make the matter of this London meeting a matter of controversy. I agree with the sentiments expressed by the 'Irish Press' yesterday, under the heading 'Not a Party Fight'. In this leader it was stated that the prospect of a political dogfight in the Dail over the outcome of the London meeting is profoundly depressing, and could only be sad and damaging. It calls for a measured sense of responsibility in presenting the arguments. I shall endeavour to respond to this call, not alone by foregoing the right of reply that a debate would have afforded me but, as suggested, by endeavouring to tease out the matters at issue in a calm and reasoned manner.

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In this connection, I would point out that after both the May and December meetings last year I supported the approach of my predecessor. On 29th May, 1980, I said in this House:-

"In the meantime, if he can concentrate on bringing to its full and logical conclusion the concept of unity by consent, he will have the support of this party".

(Dáil Debates. Vol. 321, No. 7, Col. 1085).

On 11th December, 1980, I said:

"At this time we must wish his efforts well - for our country's sake and above all for the sake of our fellow countrymen in the North".

(Dail Debates, Vol. 325 No. 6, Col. 985).

What has been achieved by this meeting in London can be summarised under nine headings, the first three of which relate to new institutional arrangements with the United Kingdom.

Before detailing what has been agreed under these three headings with respect to new Anglo-Irish institutional arrangements, I should like to recall the genesis of his concept. The view that the problems which all of us in Ireland face must be resolved in the context of progress in the

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wider arena of Anglo-Irish relations was made explicit in 1979 both by my own party in its policy document, "Ireland - Our Future Together" and in the SDLP policy document "Towards a New Ireland - A Policy Review"

Be it said to the credit of the SDLP, a party too frequently criticised nowadays for narrowness of approach, that they presented the concept primarily as a method designed to resolve the anxieties of the Unionists rather than as a means to advance their own political priorities. In fact they conceived of the Anglo-Irish institutions as a network of dialogues through which North/South exchanges would be conducted, as it were, across a UK-Ireland table. Thus, on one side of that table, unionists and unionist interests would find themselves, together with Northern minority interests, represented in British company, and, thus reinforced in a United Kingdom framework, the unionists could face with greater confidence our representatives on the other side. The intention, in short, was to create confidence and thus over time to facilitate dialogue; it was not to create institutions which would in themselves produce constitutional change.

Following these Fine Gael and SDLP proposals, my predecessor in May 1980, initiated discussions with the British Government which by December had brought the concept of an Anglo-Irish approach to the forefront. I welcomed these discussions; I

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did not, as one press comment suggests, "set them at nought". However they appeared as being pursued subsequently in a different, almost opposite light, from that originally envisaged by the SDLP. Instead of being seen as a strategy for the creation of confidence and the promotion of dialogue, the approach became perceived as tending to weaken confidence and to inhibit dialogue. The unhappy consequences of this are apparent in some extreme unionist reactions to last Friday's London meeting.

Turning now to the first of the three institutional tiers, it was agreed to establish an Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Council, through which institutional expression can be given to the unique character of the relationship between the two countries. This Council will involve regular meetings between the Governments at Ministerial and official levels to discuss matters of common concern. This body corresponds to that which the Leader of the Opposition proposed in his BBC interview of 30th October last when he said: "First of all there would of course be inter-governmental Ministerial meetings, that is Ministers from Westminster and Ministers from Dublin. Now this body would subsume all the existing contacts between different Ministers and put these contacts on a much more formal regular basis".

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I have to say without rancour that I find difficulty in reconciling Deputy Haughey's commendation of such an inter-governmental Council 12 days ago with his remarks last Saturday when he dismissed the inter-governmental Council now established as "limited to just ministerial and administrative considerations.....just giving a name to a series of meetings which have already begun".

Second, it was agreed that it would be for the Parliaments concerned to consider at the appropriate time whether there should be an Anglo-Irish body at Parliamentary level comprising members to be drawn from the British and Irish Parliaments, the European Parliament and any elected Assembly that may be established in Northern Ireland. I was conscious of the fact that within the only Parliamentary bodies that at present comprise representatives elected in Northern Ireland, viz. the British and European Parliaments, the membership is grossly unrepresentative as between the two sections of the community in Northern Ireland, a ratio well under one-half the proportion of that community that belongs to the nationalist tradition.

I do not exclude in principle the possibility of the membership of the Parliamentary Council being drawn from existing Parliamentary bodies, especially in circumstances where the representation of the different sections of the community in

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Northern Ireland in these bodies were more proportionate to the actual size than at present. But as things stand, and given the possibility, at least, that an elected assembly might come into being in Northern Ireland before long - I can only say 'possibility' because I know that the new Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has not yet had time to consider even whether to propose the establishment of such an Assembly to his Government - it seemed to me preferable not to press ahead with an Anglo-Irish Parliamentary Council at this time in view of the difficulty of securing from the existing Parliaments a fair representation of Northern Ireland opinion on such a body.

I was fortified in my judgment on this point by the comment of Mr. John Hume, Leader of the SDLP, on RTE last Friday. He asserted that "sensible progress was made today" and said that he "did not expect the parliamentary ties at this stage, because of the problem of adequate representation from the North".

The Leader of the Opposition, in his comment that "the lack of parliamentary participation is a retrograde step" appears to me not to have been sensitive to the consideration that has influenced both Mr. Hume and myself in our approaches to this matter. On the basis of his own proposal, made in an interview on the 'Today Tonight' Programme on 28th October that

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the Parliamentary Council should include 12 representatives from Northern Ireland, it would appear that he is prepared to envisage a Northern Ireland representation on a Parliamentary Council comprising at least 10 representatives of the unionist section of the community, and, on the nationalist side, at most Gerry Fitt, M.P., and John Hume, M.E.P.

I would not wish my concern on this point to be seen as in any way under-playing the importance of the role of representatives of the unionist section of the community in such a Council. It has been suggested that I have shown myself insensitive with regard to whether they participate in such a Council or not. This is emphatically not the case. I am most concerned that they should be fully and fairly represented there, and, when questioned on this issue after the London meeting I pointed out that they would have a strong interest in being so represented in order that they could ensure that their viewpoint would not go by default.

I am aware that some unionist politicians have spoken of boycotting such a Council, but, as I have already stated when interviewed on this point, I find it hard to believe that most elected representatives of the unionist tradition would wish to follow the abstentionist practice which they have always deplored in relation to the Stormont and Westminster Parliaments, and I believe that any abstention on their part,

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if it occurred, would be short-lived. Common sense and a proper concern for the protection of the interests of their section of the community, which their electors would expect of them, would I believe resolve any such problem.

I believe indeed that amongst the unionist section of the community in Northern Ireland there are many who rejoice at the proposed strengthening of ties between Ireland and Britain, and who, whatever their attitude to Irish political unity, would welcome the opportunity for closer co-operation between North and South within the framework of an Anglo-Irish Parliamentary Council. The warmth of the reaction I have experienced from many unionists to my constitutional initiative has confirmed my lifelong belief that there exists amongst the Northern majority a store of untapped goodwill towards a better North-South relationship, goodwill which for far too long we have ignored, disdained and discouraged.

I must, however, move on to my third point. This is the Advisory Committee associated with the inter-governmental Council, which, as the communiqué says, would have a wide membership, and would concern itself with economic, social and cultural co-operation. An expansion of this co-operation, both between Britain and Ireland, which have shared such a long if troubled, history, and whose peoples are so closely intermingled, and between the two parts of Ireland, must surely be welcomed by people of goodwill throughout these islands - and there are many millions of such people.

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These three tiers of the Anglo-Irish Council, when they fall into place, as I believe they will before long, will together provide the means of reflecting what has been referred to as the totality of relationships between the peoples of these islands.

It has been suggested that the outcome of the recent meeting in London is in some way a drawing back from or a diminution of what happened at the Dublin Summit last December. Nothing could be further from the truth. What was agreed last December was that officials from this country and from Britain should co-operate in drawing up joint studies covering the range of issues I have mentioned.

I cannot emphasise strongly enough that there was no agreement then on the establishment of any type of Council whatsoever, Inter-governmental, Administrative, Parliamentary or Advisory. There was no agreement on anything other than what was stated in the communiqué issued at that time. There was simply an agreement that studies should be made.

I turn now, as my fourth point, to another and very serious aspect of our relationship. While both governments have noted with approval the efforts now being made under the criminal law jurisdiction legislation to ensure that those who commit crimes

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should not be able to escape their consequences because of the border that divides our island, the British Prime Minister and myself have felt it worthwhile to invite our two Attorney Generals to consider what further improvements towards that end might be possible. I have already been asked whether this means that the two eminent lawyers in question might consider the establishment of an All-Ireland Court as an additional element in our system of justice in this island, and I have replied that such a proposal would come within the ambit of their study. I look forward to seeing the outcome of their deliberations; even before this London meeting they had already established a useful and friendly contact with each other, and I know they will lose no time in tackling this task.

My fifth point concerns another matter that affects the relations between our two peoples, viz. the imbalance of treatment of each other's citizens with respect to voting rights - Irish citizens in Britain having the right to vote in parliamentary elections while British citizens in Ireland have no such right. Now that Britain's new nationality legislation has taken shape, we are in a position to proceed in this matter, and I had the pleasure of informing the British Prime Minister that the Government have approved the Heads of a Bill to be introduced very shortly which will extend to British citizens' voting rights in elections to the Oireachtas. This is a very much overdue move, offering a belated reciprocity,

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and will help, I hope, to still those voices in Britain which from time to time criticise the rights accorded to Irish citizens to vote in British elections.

My sixth point relates to an important element of the wide-ranging agreement reached at this meeting, viz. that relating to economic issues. Many potential areas of economic co-operation are set out in the joint studies, to the publication of which I shall return in a few minutes. I was struck by the enthusiasm of our British colleagues for progress in these fields - whether they affect economic relations between Ireland and Britain or between the two parts of Ireland. Of immediate practical importance is the negotiation of the terms on which natural gas from the Kinsale field might be supplied to Northern Ireland - a negotiation whose successful outcome would lead to immediate steps to extend the Cork-Dublin pipe-line to Belfast, with the aim of providing gas to that city, and no doubt surrounding areas, by the end of 1983, if all goes according to plan.

Of great importance, too, would be the restoration of the electricity inter-connector between Northern Ireland and the Republic, which has been out of action since 1975 because of repeated attacks on it by the Provisional IRA. As the principal beneficiary of the operation of this inter-connector are the people of this State, who if it were rendered

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operational again and remained so, would be spared the need for a further investment of £50m. in electricity generation plant, the repeated destruction of this inter-connector can only be seen as an act of sabotage directed against the people of this part of Ireland. Even by the distorted logic of this illegal organisation, the severance of this link makes no sense. I hope that we can find means of restoring and maintaining it.

A new inter-connector between the south-eastern corner of our island and South Wales would bring significant benefits to both Ireland and Britain. It would end our island isolation so far as electricity is concerned, and reduce the whole island's need for spare capacity to cope with emergencies - all the more so as it would link us not merely to Britain but also, through Britain's existing and proposed new inter-connector with France, to the whole Continental network. I am glad that the Tanaiste was able in London to reach agreement on pursuing economic and technical studies on the possibility of such an electricity link, - studies for which I believe the two Governments could legitimately seek EEC assistance under the terms of reference of Community Regional Policy.

I come now to my seventh point. I have already referred to the joint studies carried out on behalf of the two governments by our civil servants, under five headings: new institutional structures, citizenship rights, economic co-operation, measures

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to encourage mutual understanding, and, finally, security matters. It has been my view ever since these studies were commissioned last December that the confidentiality which understandably is attached to work undertaken by our civil servants carried with it dangers of misunderstandings which could be dispelled only by publication of these studies - excepting, of course, the study on security matters, which of its nature is not amenable to publication. I believe that it would have been wiser if the two Governments when they commissioned these studies had announced there and then that they would be published when completed.

The fact that this was not done enabled some people who are hostile to any improvement in relations between Ireland and Britain, or between the two parts of Ireland, to arouse and foster suspicions which had no foundations in reality. The so-called 'Carson Trail', which deeply alarmed many members of the nationalist section of the community in Northern Ireland, and disturbed very many unionists as well, was one of the consequences of not making it clear that these studies would be published.

I stated in opposition that, if elected to government, I would seek to have these studies published so that the opportunity to make mischief would be removed. Since election to government, I have pressed this matter with the British Government, and I

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am very pleased that the British Prime Minister agreed to my proposal when we discussed the matter on Friday last. These studies will be published here and in London tomorrow. They will be found to contain nothing dramatic, but much solid, useful work, upon which we can build closer relations between Ireland and Britain, and between North and South in the months and years ahead.

There is one point I should like to add concerning the security study which is not being published. This study which was, of course, carried out at official level, contains nothing that impinges in any way on our neutrality or raises any other issue which would require the authority or attention of this House. I would like to assure the House that since the change of Government, neither I nor any of my colleagues in Government nor any government official has raised any such matters in our contacts with British counterparts.

I come now to my eighth point, the question of the British Government's attitude to the re-unification of Ireland by consent - a principle to which the two parties forming this Government have been publicly committed since the Autumn of 1969, and which Fianna Fail had made its own also by the time the Sunningdale Agreement was signed.

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The communiqué first notes that the British Prime Minister affirmed, and that I agreed, that any change in the constitutional status of Northern Ireland would require the consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland. This statement has evoked from the Leader of the Opposition an affirmation that there was no mention of what he described as a 'constitutional guarantee' in the Dublin communiqué of last December, and that in last Friday's communiqué "not alone is the guarantee introduced in the most unreserved and naked form, but for the first time there is a clear agreement by the head of an Irish Government to the maintenance of that guarantee", and he described this as "a serious and retrograde step".

I have already had occasion to comment on this statement, which ignored the fact that the phraseology Deputy Haughey complains of was drawn almost verbatim from the communiqué issued after his May 1980 meeting with the British Prime Minister. This quoted Deputy Haughey as "agreeing with the Prime Minister that any change in the constitutional status of Northern Ireland would only come about with the consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland". I think I am not alone in being puzzled as to how Deputy Haughey's apparently innocuous and beneficent formulation that re-unification "would only come about" on this condition is converted into "an unreserved and naked guarantee", offering for the first time "a clear

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agreement to the maintenance of that guarantee", by the simple substitution of the word "requires" for the words "would only come about". No amount of reflection on these two alternative verbs - and I have pondered them at great length since last Saturday - has revealed to me the significance of a purported distinction between them, never mind one justifying the striking language which the Leader of the Opposition used to condemn the shorter formulation employed in Friday's communiqué, nor yet the attempted rationalisations of the distinction by a Fianna Fail spokesman in the 'Sunday Press' and in yesterday's "Irish Press".

The only credible explanation for Deputy Haughey's statement on this matter is that he failed to check the May 1980 communique before giving his Saturday Press Conference, and, forgetting what he had then committed himself to, launched an attack which cannot be sustained. It would have been better for him if he had simply admitted his error of recollection.

But leaving on one side what must be seen as a casuistic verbal rationalisation, I want to come to the essential element of this part of the communique - the commitment by the British Prime Minister that if the consent of a majority to a change in the constitutional status of Northern were given, "the British Government would of course accept their decision, and would support legislation in the British Parliament to give effect to

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it". It is undeniable that no British Government has, since Sunningdale, expressed itself in quite these terms - indeed in the interval statements by successive British Governments on this issue have been uniformly expressed in purely negative language.

This communiqué sets out in clear and positive language the particular and specific meaning of the support to which the Sunningdale communiqué had earlier referred. It has now been made clear that the present British Government would be prepared to support legislation to give effect to a majority wish for unity. The positions of the British and Irish Governments are, as a result, in closer accord.

But let me insist that the essential element in this, as in all formulations of the aspiration to unity that successive Irish Governments have put forward during the past decade, or have sought to have made by British Governments, is the principle of the free consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland. In our insistence on that principle lies the key to the eventual removal of unionist fears, which were built up over many years by verbal republicanism in this part of Ireland, by talk such as that of "getting back our lost Six Counties".

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I know that it will take a long time to still the fears that were aroused by those decades of unthinking irredentism; I know that so long as our Constitution asserts a right of the Oireachtas and Government established by the Constitution of this State to make laws for the part of Ireland that is not a part of this State, these fears will survive, with all the lethal consequences that flow from them for the embattled people of Northern Ireland.

But if our course is a steady and firm one, if we stick fast by the principle of reunification only with the consent of a majority, and are joined in this approach by an equivalent British commitment to accept any decision a majority in Northern Ireland may eventually make in favour of a change in their constitutional position and to support that decision by legislation in the British Parliament, then both sections of the community in Northern Ireland can feel that their aspirations are equally protected and assured. In time, given this assurance, they will find it easier to live in amity with each other, and to root out the men of violence on either side, who seek to destroy that part of our island.

Our task must be to seek reconciliation - between the two sections of the community in Northern Ireland and between North and South. This brings me to my ninth and final point. The

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communiqué records the joint recognition by the Prime Minister and myself on behalf of our respective governments of "the need for efforts to diminish the divisions between the two sections in Northern Ireland and to reconcile the two major traditions that exist in the two parts of Ireland."

While I supported the initiative of my predecessor in embarking on the Anglo-Irish approach, I must now pay a tribute to another Fianna Fail predecessor. For it was Jack Lynch who, during the terrible and dangerous summer of 1969 and throughout the events of 1970 which threatened our State even more directly, insisted that the only way forward to Irish unity, the only peaceful and realistic way, was the reconciliation of the traditions that exist on this island. In doing so he calmed the fears of many in the two sections of the community in Northern Ireland and his words and his actions saved lives.

I am glad that my discussions in London have led the British Government for the first time to join with us in a commitment towards this end: the reconciliation of the peoples of the two parts of Ireland. Only those with a vested interest in dissension and disaffection can quarrel with this joint commitment by both of us to set about bringing an end to the bitterness that has divided this island for so long.

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Let none of us have any illusions that the path ahead will be short, or smooth. There has been too much violence, too much hatred, through too many centuries, for it all to be extinguished at one stroke, or without great and sustained effort. But our two Governments are now jointly committed to the task of reconciling the Irish people. That is a great first step along the difficult road ahead. I am glad to have been able to participate in taking that step. I was encouraged by the warmth and sensitivity shown by the British Prime Minister during our discussions. When we meet again next Spring we shall, I am convinced, make further practical progress with many matters set in train on Friday last. I commend to the House the results of our work.