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British Reaction to the proposal for a
Forum for a New Ireland

1. House of Commons 9 February 1983

Mr. Dubs: "would not the best initiative be to raise with the Government of the Republic of Ireland the possibility of the setting up a forum at which representatives of the people of the whole of Ireland could discuss issues which interest the whole of Ireland, such as energy policy, economic development, transport and perhaps security".

Mr. Hurd: "The hon. Gentleman is putting forward a suggestion similar to one recently aired by the SDLP in Northern Ireland. We believe that the establishment of widely acceptable devolved institutions in Northern Ireland offers the best chance of securing peace, political stability and recovery there."

2.

".....the Irish Government's move has been welcomed by Labour MPs but has found little favour among Conservatives. Labour's deputy Northern Ireland spokesman, Mr. Clive Soley, said he would like everyone to consider participating in a move which he judged positive and encouraging. He added: "It's a step in the right direction. I just hope the people in the North recognise that there's got to be an all-Ireland dimension to any longterm solution. They've got nothing to lose by talking".

.....Conservative MPs were in general more reluctant to comment publicly. One, however, the Right-wing backbencher Sir John Biggs-Davison, issued a statement saying: "Dr. FitzGerald's undoubtedly good intention to help end the Ulster violence is welcome. But his proposed all-Ireland forum is ill-conceived.The Foreign Office and 10 Downing Street are each responding to enquiries with precisely the same words as were used in the initial statement of reaction from the NIO on Friday night. This said that the Irish Government and other parties were free to discuss unity and that it was for the people of Northern Ireland to decide whether they wished to participate in such discussions. But such talks could not affect the fundamental position that Northern Ireland was and would remain a part of the United Kingdom while the majority of its people so wished.

3. House of Lords 14.3.83

Lord Donaldson of Kingsbridge: ".....It seems to me that if Dr. FitzGerald, with his colleagues and the SDLP, with John Hume and the rest of them, decide on the best possible terms that they can offer if the situation ever arose, then at least the Reverend Paisley and others would know what they are prepared to discuss, what at the moment they simply do not....."

Lord Gowrie: ".....I believe that this (SDLP abstention from the Assembly) is unfortunate for the Province as a whole, as I think it is inimical to the longterm interest of the Nationalist Community. It should be no surprise to the SDLP that in the same dog-in-the-manger spirit, if I may put it that way, it seems likely that Unionist Assembly members will boycott any conference with parties in the South....."

Lord Underhill: "....His (Dr. FitzGerald's) suggestion about a forum for democratic parties from both the North and the South, aimed at a new initiative to solve the Northern Ireland problem, surely ought to be encouraged....."

4. "For the second time in as many days the Northern Ireland Secretary of State, Mr. Prior, yesterday hinted at his disapproval of the Irish Government's support for the SDLP's all-Ireland Forum. During a brief interview on BBC radio Mr. Prior spoke of unspecified changes which he believed needed to be made in the Republic's attitude towards Northern Ireland. This was taken as an oblique reference to articles two and three of the Republic's constitution..... In an interview with the Sunday Independent on Sunday last Mr. Prior said he could not see anything useful developing from an all-Ireland forum.

The Irish Times 22.3.1983

5. "Northern Ireland Secretary, Jim Prior, said he hopes "something useful" can come out of the new Ireland forum which meets today in Dublin.....

"One has to accept life as it is and see if anything constructive that can be achieved. One always hopes that initiatives can produce beneficial results. I am not so narrow-minded to reject any hope of constructive talks from any quarter."

The Belfast Newsletter 14.4.83

6. House of Commons 14.4.83

Mr. Prior: "Any forum or initiative which puts at risk the view of the majority of the people of Northern Ireland that they should remain part of the United Kingdom is bound to start at a major disadvantage. Having said that, I must add that any constructive talks will be welcomed, just as the SDLP playing a part in the Assembly in Northern Ireland will be welcomed..... If some questions could be asked within the forum about the real attitude of the Republican Government towards unity, we could make more progress.

7. During the recent visit to Dublin by British Labour Back Benchers, Alec Lyon M.P. reported NIO Minister of State Nicholas Scott as saying that the Forum "must be played out".

Anglo-Irish Section

3 May 1983