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Statement by the Taoiseach, Mr. Albert Reynolds, T.D.,
on the Joint Declaration on Peace,
Wednesday, 15 December 1993.

Today, we pray, will be a historic day for peace in Ireland. This morning, the British Prime Minister John Major and I, at our third meeting this month, made a joint declaration, which creates a framework for the beginning of a peace process. This, we hope, will be the first step on the road to a just and lasting peace.

The Joint Declaration, which I am laying before the House, contains a central message for people of every political outlook in Northern Ireland, Republican and Loyalist, Unionist and Nationalist. That is, that their ideals for the future and their interests in the present can be pursued and protected much more effectively through the democratic process, and need no resort to violent threat or coercion.

My guiding principle has been that we should not seek to prejudice or predetermine the shape of a final political settlement. Finding a political solution is a matter for all-round negotiations between the Governments and the democratic political parties in Northern Ireland, the prospects for which would be transformed by peace. The Declaration preserves a careful balance between the rights, identities and aspirations of the two political traditions on this island. I consulted very widely in both communities in order that this might be achieved. It would be my hope that people of every political outlook would be able to identify with the Declaration and with its overall thrust.

This is an unusual declaration between Governments. It does not just reflect the views and interests of the two Governments or provide some compromise between them. Instead, it seeks to comprehend the deeply held positions of all who find themselves caught up in the narrow ground of a conflict with ancient roots within a part of this island. It makes clear that the British Government are in no sense an enemy to the rights of the Nationalist tradition, and the Irish Government are in no sense an enemy to the rights of the Unionist tradition.

The overriding objective, the overriding criterion for the language of this Declaration is whether each statement in it makes a contribution to peace, and whether it adequately reflects deeply held fears and essential interests.

I am convinced that nobody should be afraid of peace. The purpose of this Joint Declaration is to help remove conflicts of interest, and fundamental differences in the sense of identity out of the arena of violence, and to place them purely in the political and democratic arena. There are many on different sides, who feel that up until now the framework has been loaded against them, undermining, as they see it, the normal rules of democracy. The Declaration in my view helps to create a level political playing field, which no longer leaves any excuse for violence. The road is open, on the one hand, to a united Ireland, if it can be achieved by agreement and consent. But equally, it is clearly reaffirmed that there will be no change in the constitutional status of Northern Ireland without such agreement. It is the essence, indeed the unique virtue of the democratic system, that it allows peaceful competition between conflicting ideals and provides a civilized method of settling conflicts and disputes.

The purpose of a framework for peace would be to advance general principles accepted by the two Governments, which guarantee to all the right to pursue their aims by democratic means, and to have the results of the democratic process put into effect. The Declaration, however, does not replace or affect the validity of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, nor is it a substitute for a more comprehensive agreement which might transcend it.

There was never a better opportunity for everyone to bring the Troubles and appalling violence of the last 25 years to an end. That violence has created intense human misery. It has wrecked lives and caused wanton destruction. It has divided communities. It has cast a pall of shame over the whole island. It has held back the whole country in terms of economic opportunity, especially tourism, trade and investment. The conflict has also been senseless. No one engaging in violence has been able to further their political aims to any worthwhile degree. Both sets of paramilitaries have directly or indirectly inflicted, no doubt unintentionally, considerable damage on their own communities as well as on others.

Everyone wants peace. Peace has been the paramount consideration for me. A political settlement, which will involve difficult negotiations, will come much more easily in conditions of peace. What Ireland needs now above all else is peace. We all appreciate that the political differences in Northern Ireland run very deep. Every attempt over the last twenty years to construct a political settlement has failed. There have been many ambitious efforts, the most imaginative being Sunningdale and the Anglo-Irish Agreement. But none of them succeeded in their central objective of creating conditions for peace.

Continuing violence has made the ongoing search for a political settlement difficult, and would probably work to try to frustrate the effect of any political agreement that was reached. Can we not agree as a first step a framework for peace where all could recognise their basic concerns were reflected, and which all could therefore properly and honourably avail of, without prejudice to their principles, in the necessary task of negotiating our future?

I was not prepared through inaction to condemn the people of Northern Ireland to another 25 years of violence. They deserve better. I am convinced that peace cannot and need not wait upon the uphill task of trying to find a comprehensive political settlement in the midst of all the violence, unless there is no other path available. What is necessary is to convince those engaged in violence that there is no point to that violence, and that their basic political objectives can be more effectively pursued exclusively by democratic political means, whether they are Republican or Loyalist.

There has also been a policy of placing in political ghettos and marginalizing, not only the people directly engaged in violence, but very often the communities from which they spring. That too has failed. Belatedly, we have had to try and reach out to the marginalized and the alienated, and to try and comprehend the motives of those whose acts have filled us with abhorrence. It has involved on the part of the two Governments, and many of the Northern political and Church and Community leaders, the taking of risks, and acts of courage. Those involved in the paramilitary groups and those responsible for leading them will also show the greatest courage, if they now seize the opportunity for peace.

There are two sets of paramilitaries engaged in violence, both Republican and Loyalist. The Loyalist paramilitaries claim that their violence is reactive, and I am informed on reliable authority that their violence would cease soon after a cessation of Republican violence. It would seem to me that if a cessation of Republican violence could be procured, in a manner that does not in any way prejudice the democratic rights of the Unionist population, then a cessation of all violence should follow. In this regard, I deplore the tendency on the part of some politicians to exploit the threat of a Loyalist backlash, in a way that is often, I am informed, disapproved of by the same Loyalist paramilitaries themselves.

This country has up until now never enjoyed a sustained period of peace. The two traditions, while they agreed to differ at the time of the first Anglo-Irish settlement in

1920 and 1921, have never yet reached in four centuries a mutual accommodation on how they are to share this island peacefully in harmony and cooperation. The ideals of Wolfe Tone and the United Irishmen were unfortunately quickly frustrated at the time, though they may yet come to inspire us more in the future.

Creating a satisfactory mutual accommodation is our task over the coming generation, to which all of us must apply ourselves, if we are to create a far better future on this island for all our people, especially the young. We need to create a new political framework, built on respect of difference and a desire to engage in fruitful partnership and cooperation.

At my first press conference on being elected Leader of Fianna Fáil in February 1992, which was in the aftermath of particular atrocities, I declared the achievement of peace in Northern Ireland to be my foremost priority. As I have recounted elsewhere, at my first meeting with Prime Minister John Major shortly afterwards, we agreed that we would make a real effort to bring peace to Northern Ireland, and to spare the people another 25 years of bloodshed and conflict. Anyone who goes back over my speeches will note that I from the very beginning of the importance of finding a formula for peace. I have also had a passionate desire to try and bring about peace.

The leader of the SDLP, John Hume, ably supported by his Deputy Leader Seamus Mallon and other members of his Party, have throughout played a crucial role in the development of this process, and I would like to pay tribute to his tremendous courage over the years, not merely as a persistent advocate of peace and purely democratic methods, but as somebody who has been prepared, especially in recent years, to take enormous personal risks in the pursuit of peace. More than any other political leader over the last 20 years, his has been the voice of sanity in Northern Ireland, and he rightly enjoys respect throughout the world for his immense contribution. Despite his unremitting opposition to paramilitary violence, accepted by all, he enjoys, I believe, the trust and respect of the entire Nationalist community, for having been willing to come to grips with their most deep-seated problems, recognising this as the price which has to be paid for leading that community as a whole away from violence.

Having explained the background to our proposals, I now want to explain the proposals themselves for the benefit of the House. They take the form of a Joint Declaration by the Irish and British Governments.

Paragraph 1 is a statement of the problem and the need for the development of an agreed framework for peace, based on a number of key principles enunciated by the two Governments over the past 20 years. Paragraph 2 speaks of the inestimable value of healing divisions and ending conflict, and it states as their aim the fostering of agreement and reconciliation, leading to a new political framework. Paragraph 3 is a brief reference to the importance of the European dimension.

Paragraph 4 is a key one. It states that the British Government will uphold the democratic wish of a greater number of people of Northern Ireland, whether they prefer to support the Union or a sovereign united Ireland. This is followed by a reiteration by the British Prime Minister that the British Government have no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland, which is one of the foundation stones of this whole declaration. The British Government also say they will encourage, facilitate and enable the reaching of agreement among the people of the island. They accept that such agreement may, as of right, take the form of agreed structures for the island as a whole, including a united Ireland achieved by peaceful means. The principle of self-determination to be exercised by the people of Ireland alone is accepted on the basis of consent, freely and concurrently given, North and South. Any agreement arising between the people of Ireland, whether on a united Ireland or on any other basis, will be legislated for. By way of comment, I would like to say it is not new for national self-determination to be expressed by different parts of a country concurrently. That indeed is the way the states of East Germany were reunited with the Federal Republic. It would be absolutely normal procedure for any country that has been divided, whether Korea, Cyprus or China. In paragraph 4, I believe, there is full respect shown for the basic principles of Republican philosophy, but in a manner that is consistent with safeguarding the democratic rights of Unionists.

Paragraph 5 is a statement by me that stability and well-being cannot be obtained under any political system which is refused allegiance or rejected by a significant minority. I believe there are very few in this State who at this stage want to coerce the people of Northern Ireland into a united Ireland against their wishes. We have no interest in creating by force a united but unstable Ireland. We have no ambitions to take over the territory of Northern Ireland, but ignoring its people. Unless and until we can persuade a majority of the people of Northern Ireland to join with us, there will not be a united Ireland. The Unionist population should welcome the unequivocal acceptance of the principle of consent in several places in the declaration.

Paragraphs 6 to 8 reflect my desire to respond to Unionist fears. They include a willingness to accept and examine representations by them across the negotiating table with regard to any aspects of life in the South, which they believe to be discriminatory or which threaten their way of life. In the Declaration I also ask them to look on the people of the Republic as friends, who share their grief and shame over all the suffering of the last quarter of a century, and who want to develop the best possible relationship with them, in which trust and new understanding can flourish and grow. In it I also pledge to consider how the hopes and identities of all in relation to constitutional matters can be expressed in more balanced ways, which no longer cause division. I have stated that the Irish Government will, as part of a balanced constitutional accommodation, put forward and support proposals for change in the Irish Constitution, which would fully reflect the principle of consent in Northern Ireland.

Paragraph 9 reflects a commitment by both Governments to create institutions and structures to enable the people of Ireland to work together in all areas of common interest.

Paragraphs 10 and 11 address the problem of admitting democratically mandated parties to the political process as soon as possible after a cessation of violence. They contain a commitment by me to establish in consultation with other parties a Forum for Peace and Reconciliation, after a real cessation of violence. This will provide quickly a guaranteed place in the political process, without prejudice to participation in wider Talks.

I am convinced that the Declaration respects or is consistent with every basic principle and obligation enunciated by the two Governments. It honours equally the Republican position and the Unionist position, and does not seek to predetermine what position will prevail in the future. In the spirit of the Government of Ireland Act, 1920, it keeps open the option of an evolution towards a united Ireland and the encouragement of closer North-South cooperation. In the case of the Irish Government, the Declaration seeks not merely to state the underlying principles of Irish Nationalism but to reach out to Unionists and to understand and respond to their fears. If the Declaration has flaws or deficiencies or omissions from any point of view, are any of them so vital as to warrant condemning the people of Northern Ireland to the indefinite continuation of violence? I believe, and everyone else in this House believes too, that the use of political violence today has no justification in any circumstances whatever. The merit of the Joint Declaration is that it convincingly demonstrates this.

To the Unionist and Protestant people of Northern Ireland, I would say - we want to end the centuries of conflict forever. We want to take the gun out of Irish politics for good. We want to develop a new atmosphere of trust and co-operation, to establish a new era of détente, which is the only way forward. Even if we are not able at present to agree on very much, let us at least establish peace between us once and for all. I have consulted some of your leaders best placed to interpret to me your fears and your needs. I have also taken account of some of the positions put to me on behalf of Loyalist organisations, who are as much a factor in the situation as their Republican counterparts, and whom I have been determined not to make the mistake of ignoring.

The Nationalist community suffered neglect and discrimination for 50 years. It is the duty of the Irish Government to ensure that that never happens again. Even from outside our jurisdiction, Northern Nationalists attach a special value to their membership of the Irish nation, which will never be disowned by us.

I appeal directly to the Provisional IRA to respond now to the wishes of the Irish nation clearly and emphatically expressed on repeated occasions to stop the killing. If the self-determination of the Irish people has any meaning or application, it surely applies above all else to the repeated rejection of support for violence at the polls by a large majority of both communities on this island. Once violence permanently ceases, the political leadership of Sinn Féin can join the rest of the democratic politicians on this island in working for a better and freer future for us all, for true peace with justice. Let us be prepared to bring everyone who has been excluded in from the cold. While we will never accept the terrible deeds of the last 25 years, committed on all sides, let us remember that the blame for them lies in more than one quarter, and that some of it is very deep-rooted in our history. For the first time ever, the right to self-determination of the people of Ireland is acknowledged, subject only to the condition of consent. The British Government have pledged to work for agreement, and will respect the democratic choice of the people of Northern Ireland as to their constitutional status, whether it be future Union or a sovereign united Ireland. There is no Unionist veto, only the requirement for the consent of a majority. The task now is to find a political settlement.

I call on everyone of goodwill both in Ireland and abroad to join now in ensuring that the beginning of peace becomes a reality, before this year is out. Let us together open a new era in our history. Just as the 1918 Election 75 years ago this month

involved a new beginning in the development of Irish democracy, let December 1993 be the moment we begin to resolve the conflict in Northern Ireland.

If anyone's nerve fails or falters at this point, dark clouds are looming on the horizon. The danger of renewed and more intense conflict is very real. The dogs of war are waiting to be unleashed, and the Shankill and Greysteel atrocities could be a foretaste of the future. A continuation of violence could have very grave consequences for everyone on this island. The IRA and Sinn Féin should recognise their tremendous responsibility to the Nationalist community in Northern Ireland, in particular, who have suffered so much in the past, and who could stand to suffer more than most both physically and politically, if the wrong decision is made.

I have only one vision in relation to Northern Ireland - that is to accomplish peace with the help of all who can give it. Here I want to acknowledge the great contribution made over the last 12 months by the Tánaiste towards the same objective. It was a team effort, and our two offices have worked together extremely closely. I would like to thank all the Opposition parties, and their leaders, for the degree of patience and understanding they have shown in the national interest over the past few weeks, and for their broad support. I also want to thank above all the many tireless workers for peace in Northern Ireland, the community leaders, the clergymen of all denominations and others, who have done all they can to advance the process, and without whom the undertaking of this initiative would have been quite impossible. I am taking steps today to inform foreign Governments and other interested parties of the initiative between the two Governments.

I have annexed the Joint Declaration to the text of my speech.

It now falls to others to consider their position and to respond after mature deliberation. They should be given space by everyone to do so, and helped to reach a positive decision. The Chief Rabbi wrote to me recently, expressing the hope that we might yet see in our land and between these islands the fulfilment of the vision of the prophet Isaiah 'that nation shall not lift up sword against nation, they shall learn war no more'.

I have done everything I can to reach this point, and to give peace the best possible chance. All I can say in conclusion is this. No one should be afraid of peace. Here is the opportunity for peace. Here let us all make our stand.