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Common Debate on Declaration

The extracts below from BBC NI TV coverage do not cover the full debate - we missed some interventions - but they may be immediately helpful. From what we saw, there was approval or qualified acceptance of the Declaration on all sides of the House except the DUP (I have also heard Archbishop Eames give his approval of "the courageous attempt" on Radio Ulster). Note John Smith's two questions and Prime Minister's response, also the Prime Minister's spirited replies to Paisley and Robinson (in tone as well as content), Hume's support and the Prime Minister's graceful acknowledgment, and the Prime Minister's general response to the specific questions put by Maginnis and Kilfedder.

"Mr. Smith: Can I ask the Rt. Honorable Gentleman two questions on the detail of the Declaration. In paragraph nine, both Governments commit themselves to seeking to create institutions and structures which would enable the people of Ireland to work together in all areas of common interest. What kind of institutions and what areas of policy do the Governments have in mind, and secondly, the Rt. Honorable Gentleman referred to what he describes as the crucial sentence in paragraph four about consent being freely and concurrently given North and South. Is it the meaning of this passage that a constitutional settlement arising from the talks process could be put in separate referenda on the same day to the people of Northern Ireland and of the Republic? Finally, may I endorse the appeal for an end to violence which the Rt. Honorable Gentleman made in his concluding sentence. That must be the overwhelming desire of all the people of the British Isles, not least those in Northern Ireland, who have suffered the appalling violence of the last 25 years.

Mr. Major: As far as the Rt. Honorable Gentleman's two specific questions are concerned, the reference in paragraph nine refers specifically to the three-stranded talks that are continuing at the present time and there would be a large number of areas of common interest that are being identified in these talks that would be the subject of the structures referred to. As far as freely and concurrently given is concerned in terms of referenda, it certainly need not necessarily mean referenda on the same day at all. What it does mean is that that could be the situation; it is a matter for agreement in the talks and beyond. But it certainly need

Note

not necessarily be upon the same day. It does imply that consents would need to be given separately North and South.

Mr. Molyneux: Has the Prime Minister noticed that already this morning's statement is being termed "the Downing Street Declaration" and those of us who remember the earlier Downing Street declaration in the time of the Government of Lord Wilson will remember that it was very specific in saying that the affairs of Northern Ireland were an internal matter for the Parliament of the United Kingdom. Can I, in a constructive fashion, ask the Prime Minister to assure us that the drift from that position over the past 20 years will be halted under his premiership? Madame Speaker, whatever the eventual conclusions one may draw from this rather torturously worded statement with its many contradictions, it does seem, and I'm referring to the statement, not the one just made by the Prime Minister, it does appear to give some finality to the secret discussions which have destabilised the Province over recent months and which the Prime Minister has recognised just now. Does the Prime Minister share my expectation that we can now proceed to govern Northern Ireland in accordance with the wishes of 85% of the population, Protestant and Roman Catholic, who were greatly reassured by his remark to this House on 18th November that, and I quote his words, "the future constitutional position of the people of Northern Ireland is a matter for the people of Northern Ireland to determine and for no-one else to determine". May I just finally ask the Prime Minister can he confirm that the joint statement does not assert the value or legitimacy of achieving a united Ireland without majority consent, commit the people of Northern Ireland to joining a united Ireland against their democratic wishes, establish any form of joint authority over Northern Ireland, even by phasing, establish any joint mechanisms such as a permanent convention, or give Sinn Fein an immediate place at the talks table, and can the Prime Minister also confirm that the statement does not sideline the very valuable round of meetings between the parties convened by the Minister, the Honourable Member for Devizee, which are now drawing towards a successful conclusion and which have been supported just now by the leader of Her Majesty's Opposition?

Mr. Major: Let me say to the Rt. Honorable Gentleman upon his specific points at the end, I can confirm to him the joint declaration does not assert the value of achieving a united Ireland, does not assert the legitimacy of a united Ireland in the absence of majority consent, does not either, for I think it was implicit in what the Rt. Honorable Gentleman said, commit the British Government to joining the ranks of the persuaders for a united Ireland, that is not the job of any British Government, it has not set any timetable for a united Ireland, it doesn't commit the people of Northern Ireland to join a united Ireland against its wishes and it does not establish any arrangements for joint authority, I can confirm each of those points to the Rt. Honorable Gentleman. As far as the talks process undertaken by my Honorable Friend the

Member for Devizes is concerned, we anticipate and expect that they will both continue and intensify. They are, I believe, becoming extremely valuable. We wish to proceed with them with all speed so that we can make further progress in the talks which will run alongside the Declaration that I have just set out to the House. As far as the consent principle is concerned, I reiterate again why I wish no-one to be in any doubt about this, the position, the future constitutional position of Northern Ireland, lies now and will continue to lie within the wishes of the people of Northern Ireland. Also as long as a majority of the people of Northern Ireland wish to remain within the union, then they will have the total and complete support of this Government in doing so.

Mr. Paisley: Would the Prime Minister care to comment on the fact that the great difficulty and the field of controversy between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic, Northern Ireland being a member of the United Kingdom, although this document never once mentions the United Kingdom, that word has been jettisoned entirely from the document, but could I ask him this question, this question of Articles 2 and 3. Surely that is the very nub of the matter of controversy. Why is it that this paper doesn't even mention it? Now a member of this Government said to me outside, "Oh yes, but look at page 5." I have read this document carefully; in fact I was able to get from Dublin the whole information which I put into my letter 24 hours before this document was available to other people. But this is what I want to say to the Prime Minister now, and it's very important that the Prime Minister answer this question, he confirms that in the event of an overall settlement the Irish Government, is what the Taoiseach says, 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. But it's not the principle of consent in Northern Ireland that has anything to do with Articles 2 and 3, it's the principle of the territorial claim, and yet this most important matter has not even been referred to. Could the Prime Minister tell us what the statement on page 2 really does to the present position, and I'm quoting from paragraph four: "The British Government agrees that it is for the people of the island of Ireland alone, by agreement between the two parts respectively, to exercise their right of self-determination on the basis of consent freely and concurrently given North and South to bring about a united Ireland, if that is their wish." How is that different and isn't it different from the present situation when the entity of self-determination in Northern Ireland is the people of Northern Ireland. Why must the people of Northern Ireland be now linked with the Irish Republic on a question of their own right to remain within this United Kingdom. And finally, could I say to the Prime Minister, as a public representative, I find it very offensive to be told that in three months' time, if the IRA cease their violence, without any conditions of handing over their weapons or their bomb-making material or any of their military prowess, that they will be invited as

constitutional politicians to sit down. That goes to the very gut of the resentment of the people of Northern Ireland who have been slaughtered and butchered and murdered, and I don't mind what the Honorable Member says here, he hasn't had his constituents murdered and butchered, maybe he would like to sit down with the godfathers of the people that would do it, and that goes right to the gut of the people of Northern Ireland. And they look upon this as really a sell-out, act of treachery.

Mr. Major: Let me touch upon the last part first. The Honorable Gentleman makes the point that some of his constituents have been murdered during the course of the last 25 years by terrorist activities. I acknowledge that and I understand the misery that would have given to his constituents, their families and to the Honorable Gentleman himself. I must say to the Honorable Gentleman, the purpose of this Agreement and this document is to make sure that 25 years now his successor does not sit there saying that to the Prime Minister. I wish to take action to make sure there's no more bloodshed of this sort. No more coffins carried away week after week because politicians will not have the courage to sit down, address the problem and find a way through. And I am prepared to do that and if the Rt. Honorable Gentleman believes that I should not, then he does not understand the responsibilities of the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. On his three questions, it doesn't specifically refer to the United Kingdom, it specifically refers to the Union, which I think the Honorable Gentleman himself cares about. If he reads the document carefully, which alas he had not done when he made his remarks this morning and issued his letter, he will see that reference to the Union. As far as Articles 2 and 3 are concerned, the quotation answers his own question; that is clearly intended to refer to Articles 2 and 3 in due course and does so refer. On his third point on paragraph four about freely expressed consent, the specific point of paragraph four, to mention the freely expressed consent North and South respectively. What it is saying to the Honorable Gentleman, that he, his constituents and all the other people in Northern Ireland have themselves, by their own actions, in their hands the future constitutional position of Ulster.

Mr. Bums: Could I express to the Prime Minister and to Mr. Reynolds my deep appreciation for the enormous amount of energy that they have put into trying to grasp the hope of peace, the hope that is shared by the masses of the people on both of these islands. And could I say that having read this joint declaration, it is one of the most comprehensive declarations that has been made about British-Irish relations in the past 70 years. And my appeal to all sections of our people is to read the entire statement in full and to have no knee-jerk reactions, but to study it carefully and in full before responding. And as the House would be aware, it's been a consistent position of my party that the British-Irish quarrel of old, the quarrel of sovereignty, has changed

post-nationalist Europe of which we are members but that the legacy of that past is the deeply divided people, and I welcome the fact that this declaration identifies the problem as the deeply divided people of Ireland. I also welcome the fact that it recognises that that division can only be healed by agreement and by an agreement that earns the allegiance and agreement of all our traditions and respects their diversity. And would you agree with me, as I welcome also the fact that his Government has committed themselves to promoting such agreement and to encouraging such agreement, and whatever form that agreement takes the Government will endorse. And will you agree with me that the joint statement is a challenge to all parties to come to the table in a totally peaceful atmosphere and to begin what is the very difficult process, and it will be a difficult process, of reaching agreement, but if it takes place in a peaceful atmosphere we will have much more chance of reaching such an agreement, and my appeal to everyone who comes to that table would be that they come armed only with the strength of their convictions and not with any form of coercion or physical force. And let us remember at this time that it is people that have rights, not territory, that humanity transcends nationality, and could all of this House share with me at this moment the hope of all our people that today will be the first major step on a road that will remove forever the gun and the bomb from our small island people.

Mr. Major: Well I'm grateful to the Honorable Gentleman for this comprehensive support. The Honorable Gentleman is right. The declaration is a challenge to all parties and to all people concerned with finding a peaceful settlement in Northern Ireland. I have to say to all parties I think we have no moral alternative but to take up that challenge and see if we can find a satisfactory outcome. The Honorable Gentleman has shown his personal commitment to a settlement in Northern Ireland for many years. Upon that basis, his support today is doubly welcome.

Mr. Maginnis: ... if that process of verification includes the surrender of arms and explosives and also that it requires those who have been involved in violence to declare by drafting a new manifesto and seeking approval of the ballot box by drafting a new manifesto which totally eschews violence and seeking a mandate at the ballot box before in fact they can fully enter into the democratic process.

Mr. Major: They would certainly be required to give evidence of sincerity and the fact that they have renounced violence, that is the purpose of having a gap between the renunciation and the entry into exploratory, preliminary talks, so that we can examine the matters that the Honorable Gentleman raises. The dreadful murders at Fivemiletown of the two brave men he mentioned, I think are the latest in a long catalogue of wholly unnecessary and wasteful actions that have destroyed so many people's lives in Northern Ireland. There is a

declaration were to be taken up that perhaps no more brave men need join them in the future.

Mr. Robinson: What it is that Loyal Ulster has done wrong to have this further betrayal visited upon us and when he talks to the House about the consent of Northern Ireland being required, will he remember because the people of Northern Ireland have not forgotten that their consent was neither asked for nor given for the Anglo-Irish Agreement, their consent was neither asked for nor given for this Declaration. It seems that it is only the final act of separation for which their consent will be required and will the Prime Minister tell this House, is his stomach no longer turning at the prospect of sitting down with the IRA and will he tell this House why it is that he has taken away the unfettered right of the people of Northern Ireland, of them alone, to have an act of self-determination and why he has included it, and why he has included it, in the self-determination of the island as a whole. Why is it that the Prime Ministers from this House who most protest that they are Unionists are always the ones who do the biggest harm to the Union.

Mr. Major: Well I am afraid I have to say to the Honourable Gentleman I think that was and it was intended to be a wholly destructive intervention. There is no question and the Honourable Gentleman knows there is no question of betrayal in any sense. I would invite the Honourable member to read the joint Declaration and then read it again and then read it again until he understand it for he cannot justify what he has just said. The constitutional guarantee and the consent principle are writ large in the statement and in the letter which the Honourable Gentleman published this morning with his Honourable friend the member for Antrim he claims that I had given "the Prime Minister of a foreign and alien power joint jurisdiction over part of Her Majesty's dominions". That is what the Honourable Gentleman wrote this morning. He was utterly and totally wrong about that. I have done no such thing as the joint Declaration makes unambiguously clear. The Declaration states that self-determination must be exercised subject to the agreement and consent of the majority of the people of Northern Ireland. The Honourable Gentleman should read the Declaration before he comments on it and not mislead people about it and I hope one day the Honourable Gentleman will not always put himself between actions that will bring peace and that peace.

Mr. Taylor: I fully understand the message inherent in the Declaration today and to whom that message is directed and it is because of that that obviously there is much emphasis on Irish Nationalist aspirations. However Madam Speaker, the Prime Minister will know that in my constituency 95% of the people are more interested in British aspirations and whilst he has given some assurances today and specifically referred to paragraph 2 where he says both Prime Ministers guarantee Northern Ireland's statutory constitutional guarantees. The

differently what Northern Ireland's constitutional guarantee really is and therefore for the purpose of giving confidence to the British people of my constituency can the Prime Minister assure us (1) that this Declaration in no way weakens Northern Ireland's position within the United Kingdom and (2) that it's in no way gives Dublin any further role in the internal affairs or administration of Northern Ireland.

Mr. Major: Firstly, let me say to the Honourable Gentleman I think the whole House knows that the fact that he was on one occasion very badly wounded by the IRA and of his bravery then and subsequently. I am grateful to what the Honourable Gentleman says. I can give him both the assurances that he seeks. This in no way weakens the constitutional guarantee that was first set out in the Constitution Act of 1973. There is no weakening whatsoever of that constitutional guarantee and nothing agreed today in this joint Declaration gives the Government of the Republic of Ireland any additional say in the affairs of Northern Ireland.

Mr. Kilfedder: Can we have an assurance that there will be no talks with Sinn Fein until the terrorists, the IRA, hand over all their guns, ammunition and explosives not only in Northern Ireland but all the amounts of material that they have in the Irish Republic.

Mr. Major: Well it may be rather difficult in practice to find out precisely where it is and who has it. That is a very practical difficulty that we have. What we have said beyond any doubt is that there must be the clearest possible public renunciation of violence and then there must be a decontamination period so it is clear that that renunciation of violence is going to be held and that there will be no violence so that one can then determine whether Sinn Fein can enter into discussions."

c.c. Ambassador London
Embassy Washington