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<b>Reference Code:</b>	2021/95/45
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**Statement by Dick Spring, T.D.  
Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs  
Dáil Eireann, Friday 17 December 1993**

When the British and Irish Governments agreed their Joint Declaration last Wednesday, they were clear that the step they had taken was not the end of the road towards lasting peace, nor even, to paraphrase another British Prime Minister, the beginning of the end. It was rather "the end of the beginning" of a process which has the potential to transform the way in which we, as Irish people, live together on this island. My hope is that it can be the instrument which will enable both traditions in Ireland to give the most precious gift it is in our power to bestow on each other, the gift of peace.

The determination of the two Governments to work with imagination and persistence for the achievement of peace is one necessary condition for reaching that goal. But the efforts of the Governments, however determined and inventive, are not a sufficient condition. For their efforts to succeed, they must mobilise the support of the wider public in this jurisdiction, in Northern Ireland, in Great Britain, and more widely. Our initiative, to succeed, must culminate in a recognition by those who wield the weapons of death on both sides, that these terrible methods, and all the human suffering they entail, can and must be made a thing of the past. There is a new spirit abroad, and not just in Ireland, which acknowledges that violence has a corrosive dynamic of its own, making it an instrument that always damages those who resort to it as much as, or sometimes more than, those at whom it is directed.

It is because the reaction to the Declaration is so crucial to its ultimate success, that the lead given by this House, both on Wednesday last and in this debate today, is so important. The debate has been open and frank, and I am grateful for the many constructive contributions that have been made. On balance, I think the signal which has been given is a valuable and positive one.

It shows that the elected representatives of our State, gathered here, share the paramount importance the Government attach to the goal of peace. It shows they support the efforts which have been made to advance it, and they wish to steer, as the Government does, for an honourable and lasting accommodation which will safeguard the basic concerns of both traditions in Ireland, and thereby bring peace.

The international response to the Joint Declaration has also been extremely gratifying. It demonstrates the depth of international concern at a conflict which has, sadly, clouded the name of Ireland throughout the world. It also reflects the widespread hope that it can be laid to rest once and for all.

On my instructions, our Embassies abroad have been active in bringing the Declaration to the attention of foreign Governments, international organisations and media. They have briefed them on the importance of this initiative taken jointly by the two Governments and stimulated their sympathetic interest and support. The response to these efforts has been an impressive display of international solidarity with the two Governments.

President Clinton has expressed very strong support for the Declaration. He saluted the courage and flexibility demonstrated by the Taoiseach and the Prime Minister in their search for peace and expressed the hope that all parties would be inspired by their vision. His words of encouragement have been echoed by Speaker Foley, the Friends of Ireland, Senator Kennedy, and other leaders of opinion in the United States.

Valuable expressions of support have also come from Prime Minister Keating of Australia and from the Canadian Government; from President Delors and several of our partners in the European Union and elsewhere in Europe; from the Government of Japan and many others. There have been numerous individual messages of good wishes from friends and allies around the world.

In this connection, I want to advise the House that on next Monday, at the General Affairs Council of the European Union, I hope to take an opportunity to brief my colleagues on the content and meaning of the peace

Declaration. I will be asking them to express their solidarity and support for the peace process - and I have every hope and confidence, given the history of the Union, that we can start a process of securing practical measures of support for reconstruction, especially in the border areas and in the many parts of Northern Ireland that have been economically blighted by the last twenty five years of violence.

In preparing for the work which lies ahead we will be strengthened by the knowledge that this first step we have taken towards a lasting peace has been so widely acclaimed, and that we can count on the continuing goodwill and assistance of so many.

At the same time, as the Taoiseach and I have been at pains to make clear, there is no question of our being overcome by euphoria or a false complacency. The Joint Declaration is, as the Taoiseach has described, the product of a lengthy, painstaking and arduous set of negotiations. It is, as has been recognised, a complex document of profound significance in what it says about the principles which will underlie the future political development of our island.

In spite of the painstaking efforts to consult widely in preparing the Declaration, and to balance in it the fundamental concerns of both traditions, I did not expect that everyone would rush to welcome the Joint Declaration. What I do urge, however, is that everyone, and in particular the people of Northern Ireland, who have suffered so much from the conflict of the past twenty-five years, should study the document carefully and read it as a whole and in its entirety. I commend the desire of some to refrain from immediate judgement. It was perhaps also predictable that others should have rushed to the old shibboleths of treachery and sell-out, even though I was of course disappointed by this reaction. As I have said before, for too long every development in the difficult course of the Northern conflict has been analysed purely in terms of victory and defeat, of gain and loss.

As Louis MacNeice ruefully commented

"And one read black where the other read white, his hope  
The other man's damnation".

Inevitably, then, there will be those who apply this barren calculus to the Joint Declaration, who will scan it for evidence either of triumph or disaster. There is also in Northern Ireland a very understandable wariness, after so many disappointments and failed initiatives, to believe that at last it is possible that things might change.

My first plea, therefore, is that the Joint Declaration should receive the careful scrutiny it merits. I am confident that nobody who reads it in detail and without preconceptions will see in it either a threat or a betrayal. Rather, it will be seen for what it is; the solemn expression by the two Governments of their commitment to ensuring that the future of Ireland, North and South, is decided, freely, on the basis of consent and agreement, and without any coercion, by the people of Ireland, North and South.

The Declaration is balanced; it is fair. It offers to everyone living in Ireland, and in particular in Northern Ireland, the prospect of real peace, by offering all a framework where the fundamental concerns of both traditions are reflected. It creates in short a "table" where all can sit down to negotiate the future without loss of principle or damage to basic concerns.

As is said in the Declaration's opening paragraph, the development of this agreed framework for peace is based on a number of key principles articulated by the two Governments over the past twenty years, together with the adaptation of other widely accepted principles. In other words the pieces of the jigsaw have all been to hand; but only in putting them together can we see exactly where they fit, exactly what their relationship to each other is.

Never before has there been so comprehensive a statement of the principles which have to form the basis of a meaningful political process, nor, I believe, have the implications of these principles been so fully and carefully teased out.

The British Government has confirmed its fundamental commitment to uphold the democratic wish of a greater number of the people of Northern Ireland



on their constitutional future. The Prime Minister reiterated what has been said by Ministers, that his Government have no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland - which in itself marks a radical departure from the past history of British involvement in Ireland. Rather, Britain's primary interest is now to see peace, stability and reconciliation established by agreement among all the people who inhabit the island.

The role of the British Government will be to encourage, facilitate and enable the achievement of such agreement through a process of dialogue and co-operation. Should the people of Ireland, by agreement between North and South and on the basis of consent freely and concurrently given, express their wish to bring about a united Ireland, the British Government will give effect to this, or equally to any measure of agreement on future relationships in Ireland which the people living in Ireland may themselves freely decide in the exercise of their right to self-determination.

There is only one qualification imposed on the exercise of that right and that is the requirement of concurrent North-South consent. That is a qualification which the vast majority of Irish people would in any case firmly insist on for their own good reasons, quite irrespective of any wider relationship or commitment.

I can think of no political fact more certain than this: any test of self-determination which could be devised to test the wishes of the people of this island as a whole would confirm that in their overwhelming majority they would reject any strategy of forced unity which over-rode the wishes of a majority of the people in Northern Ireland. We know too well from our history that, in the words of the Declaration, "stability and well-being will not be found under any political system which is refused allegiance or rejected on grounds of identity by a significant minority of those governed by it". We have seen the bitter fruits of the lack of consensus in Northern Ireland. The fervent wish of our people is to address and overcome that lack of consensus, not duplicate it in a different framework.

This wording of the Declaration is, inevitably, complex and careful. But it means, as I said on Wednesday, that the British Government is not the

enemy of Irish national aspirations, nor the Irish Government of those of unionists. In a nutshell, what the Declaration means is this: It is up to us. It is up to us, the people living in Ireland, to build trust, to seek reconciliation, and to reach agreement on our future. The long and tangled relationship between Ireland and Britain has created an amalgam of passions, loyalties, aspirations and enmities which for the past seventy years has been concentrated within the narrow ground of Northern Ireland.

The problems remain, but we now know beyond all doubt that the way is open to us to seek peace and reconciliation on our island. The Declaration confirms we can set about this task, not only without external impediment, but with the British Government as an active and supportive partner, prepared to "encourage, facilitate and enable" any agreement reached by Irish people on this island.

The use of violence over the past quarter of a century has consistently and rightly been rejected by the overwhelming majority of Irish people, North and South. We have condemned it as evil. We have been appalled by the death, bereavement and suffering it has brought. We have been dismayed by the sheer waste it has meant. We have seen how it has widened the gap between Unionist and Nationalist, Protestant and Catholic, North and South. We have seen it to be futile and counter-productive.

But still its perpetrators, on both sides, have continued the slaughter. Many Republicans must surely have come to realise, along with the rest of us, that a unity of territory without a unity of the people living in that territory is not just improbable, but also worthless. Now they have come to a watershed. It is time for them to choose between the meaningful political process which is now offered and the isolation of a campaign of violence which breeds only more violence, and poisons the lives of nationalists and unionists alike.

To choose the path of violence will be to condemn not just themselves, but their children and their children's children, to lives of violence and terror, of imprisonment and death. They will be turning their backs on the chance to contribute to the creation of a new Ireland.

And, I ask, for what? As John Hume has said, what is contained in this Declaration clearly negates the reasons advanced by republicans in justification of the campaign of violence. If the crude slogan of "Brits out" ever had any meaning, it has none now - unless, as so many unionists fear, it means that in the eyes of the IRA it is they who are to be overridden and forced out.

It is time for the republican movement to show that it has learned from the history of the past twenty-five years that reconciliation and trust are at the heart of the equation in Ireland. If what they seek is a genuine unity, then they have a marvellous opportunity to work for the good of the people they represent as well as for the objectives which they cherish - and which nobody is asking them to abandon.

All of us, however, and not just the republican movement, have to examine our consciences and see how we can promote the objective of peace and reconciliation. This duty falls on the Irish Government and on constitutional nationalists generally; it also, I suggest, falls on unionists and their leaders.

I know, not least from my recent contacts with unionist representatives, that there is within that community a fear of change, a belief that all change and movement in the political situation can only harm them and in some way threaten their links with Britain. Since taking office I have tried very hard to dispel these fears. Political change need not be a zero-sum game, I have argued. The position of Unionists is, in a sense, doubly guaranteed. The British Government has used this Declaration to re-state once more its constitutional guarantee that there will be no change in the status of Northern Ireland unless that is the express wish of a majority of its people.

The language of the Declaration makes clear, in its contrast between joint commitments and the individual guarantees that each Government has given, that that particular undertaking, like the statutory guarantee itself, is a matter for the British Government, not for both Governments. However the Declaration also reaffirms the joint pledge on this issue enshrined in the Anglo-Irish Agreement.



As I have said before, Unionists should also see in the best traditions of Irish nationalism, the potential for the most important guarantee of all. The Joint Declaration in a sense codifies what has been the consistent trend in the thinking of nationalists over recent decades. We accept - indeed, rejoice in - the diversity of the people who share the island.

We acknowledge the existence of two traditions, two identities, which have been defined in large part by their differing political aspirations. These two traditions deserve, throughout Ireland, an equality of respect, a parity of esteem. No political structures not founded on that basis can survive or would be worthy of survival.

I would hope that these values would be vindicated in the work of the proposed Forum. There has been some criticism of the consultation process on this issue so far. I think however it is fair to say that the essential idea underlying the Forum is in fact that of consultation, with the democratic parties in this house, and on the island generally, about how we shape our common future.

A cessation of violence would transform the situation on this island. It would be right and I believe very productive, in the wake of such a momentous change, for all democratically mandated parties to take stock of the new situation and of how the potential benefits and the momentum for positive change can be developed and consolidated. I can assure Opposition spokespersons who have expressed concern on this issue that there will be very full discussions with them to find the best means of ensuring that the Forum can contribute as effectively as possible to the goals the Taoiseach defined this morning.

In the Declaration, the Government declared that it would be wrong to attempt to impose a united Ireland in the absence of the freely-given consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland. We accepted that the civil rights and religious liberties of both communities must be fully safeguarded. Deputy Harney spoke of the importance of that part of the Declaration which evoked the possibility of social and other change in this jurisdiction. I agree with her that this area should not be overlooked.

An important section of the Partnership programme of this Government is devoted to such change, and we will be pursuing it vigorously. I believe these social changes are valuable and, in some cases, overdue in terms of the needs of this jurisdiction. The contribution they can make to removing fears and misunderstandings between the two traditions on this island is yet a further reason why the Government are right to pursue vigorously the programme which they set for themselves at the establishment of our Partnership.

We have undertaken to ensure that in no way can Unionists regard any aspect of our state as posing a real and substantial threat to their way of life or ethos - this commitment is, of course, fully in line with my determination as leader of the Labour party, to ensure that our state fully reflects the values of a pluralist and tolerant society.

Let us be clear that in making this commitment, we are undertaking to look at every aspect of Irish life in an open and honest way. Whether we are talking about the need for new symbolic or cultural expressions, or about laws and institutions, we will take that commitment very seriously. This paragraph represents an open invitation to anyone who does not share in the ethos that underpins the lives of most people in the Republic, to point out to us, whether in the context of the proposed Forum or otherwise, those aspects that they find offensive, unacceptable, or threatening.

A willingness to change on our part should go hand in hand with the potential for development in relations between the two parts of this island. There are a great many areas easily identified, where cooperation and agreement among us can pose no threat, and can only enhance the quality of life, not to mention the economic prospects, of the island as a whole.

In culture and in the arts, the diverse traditions on this island have added richness and strength to our overall expression of a national identity. The pooling of resources, while respecting that diversity, could only enhance that expression.

Whether one is talking about culture, or agricultural development, or the need to attract industrial and tourism investment into Ireland, no one can deny that the combined efforts of both parts of the island would be very powerful, just as the impact of peace on its own will have a galvanising effect. The island of Ireland is a classic case - and it always has been - where the whole can be greater than the sum of its parts. The ending of division and the building of relationships, which are both friendly and businesslike, would be a powerful catalyst for the kind of progress that will draw down the maximum benefits for the people in both parts of Ireland.

In response to some of the comments made about Section 31, that the factual position is that the Government must decide, before January 19th next, whether or not the Order banning Sinn Féin from the airwaves should be renewed or not. It can be renewed or revoked. If it is renewed, as the legislation stands, it can only be renewed for a further year, and not for any shorter period. To do anything else would require legislation amending the Broadcasting Act.

I believe that the Government will, and should, give the most careful and detailed consideration to the proposals now before it from Deputy Michael D Higgins. I would like to feel that we can arrive at a decision which will further promote and enhance the prospects of an open dialogue, in which everyone who accepts a democratic mandate can take part.

Such a dialogue would clearly not be complete - indeed it would be ludicrous - if, for example, Sinn Féin were taking part in a Forum for Peace and Reconciliation on the basis of a total cessation of violence, and still banned from taking part in debate on the airwaves.

In this respect, as in many others, the first step is up to them. We are, all of us in this House, looking for signs of a commitment to the democratic way. What I am saying is that the Government will, I believe, be prepared to play its part in encouraging those signs in every legitimate way open to us.

The Declaration confirms once more that in the event of an overall settlement arising from the dialogue which this peace framework is intended to initiate 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.

There have been arguments, and implied recriminations, about what might or might not have been done in the Talks process. I was not myself a participant and have no interest in partisan arguments about the past.

I do not however share the view that it was somehow in contradiction with the Talks process to investigate the possibility of an agreement which, in John Hume's phrase, removed the gun from Irish politics forever. Success in that endeavour would transform the prospects of success in dialogue about the practical arrangements, just as continuing violence, and the security measures it engenders, make that task immeasurably more difficult.

Progress must be made on this problem in whatever area it becomes possible. As long as there is death and destruction, we cannot flatter ourselves that we have solved the problem. The false conflict set out by some speakers between the Peace process and the Talks process overlooks that point. Both processes are complementary and, in the right circumstances, can reinforce each other.

Those who complain about the conduct of the earlier Talks should also face a clear and logical conclusion: There is now a new situation, a new Government with a new policy and new personnel. If they feel that opportunities were missed in the last Talks, let them return to the table and at the very least test whether things have now changed, and whether a new approach is now possible. I have tried to urge this point in all my contacts with Unionist representatives.

To those Unionist spokesmen who have complained that the Declaration does not address the issue of Articles 2 and 3, I say simply: please read it again. We have made a clear and binding promise, a promise which is incorporated in a declaration made jointly with the British Government.



Moreover, that controversy is surely merely a symptom of the fundamental problem facing us all, which is how we are to reconcile two traditions with differing aspirations, how we are to protect and safeguard the identities from which these traditions and aspirations stem. In the Joint Declaration the Irish Government has, in essence, repeated and amplified what we have said consistently: that we value and respect the Unionist identity in Ireland and that, while working for peace, reconciliation and agreement, we accept that there can be no change in the status of Northern Ireland without the consent of a majority of its people.

We are not an enemy of your rights and aspirations; we aspire to be your friends and partners. I honestly do not believe that any Unionist leader who calmly and seriously studies the Declaration can have reason to doubt the good faith and openness of the Government. Indeed I think that it is the duty of responsible political leaders on all sides not to misrepresent the Declaration to the people for whom they speak or to whip up fears for which absolutely no objective justification exists. But I am ready, at any time, to meet any Unionist who may feel that there are elements in the Joint Declaration which may require further elucidation, or who seeks confirmation from me, face-to-face, of what I have been saying.

The text of the Joint Declaration, accordingly, seeks, I hope and believe successfully, to balance the obligations and duties of the two Governments with a view to ensuring that the rights, aspirations and identities of all the people of this island are not only protected and guaranteed but are seen by all to be protected and guaranteed.

In so doing, it aims to create a climate for peace. Its central purpose is, in setting out clearly and comprehensively how the two Governments see their roles, to alleviate the fears, suspicions and misunderstandings which have allowed violence to take root in the political culture of Northern Ireland.

We have not sought to prejudge or predetermine the shape of a political settlement. This is a matter for lengthy and careful negotiation involving both Governments and all those in Northern Ireland committed to the democratic process.



It is my hope it will soon be possible to begin building on the progress already registered in the political talks process. I believe, however, that the prospect of a lasting and worthwhile political settlement would be immensely improved by a permanent cessation of violence from all quarters. To commit violent acts now, in the wake of this Declaration, would be still more senseless than before.

Now is the time for the near universal yearning for peace to be answered; now is the time for all of us on this island to make use of the opportunity which now exists to make a fresh start, to banish the demons of the past, to conquer our fears and our lack of trust, to learn, once and for all, how to live together on this island which is our common home.

This House will rise at the conclusion of this debate for Christmas. I imagine that this may well be the first time in the history of the House that we have risen for the Christmas recess on a note of total unanimity.

In expressing the hope that every member of the House has a happy and a peaceful Christmas, may I also express the hope that this rare unanimity among us will send a powerful message to all who want to listen. This House is adding its voice, and its determination, to those who want to dry tears, to those who want to comfort the suffering, to those who want to rebuild shattered and damaged lives.

We have a rare opportunity here today to express, in the decision we make to support this declaration, and in the season in which we make that decision, the true meaning of Christmas, and to send abroad, loud and clear, the hope of goodwill towards everyone, and peace on our small portion of the earth.

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