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Speech by the Taoiseach, Mr. Albert Reynolds T.D.,
on a motion to endorse the Joint Declaration on Peace,
Friday, 17 December 1993, at 10.45 a.m.

I move:

"That Dáil Éireann endorses and supports the Joint Declaration on Peace issued by the Taoiseach, Albert Reynolds, and Prime Minister John Major, and calls for a permanent cessation of violence and an exclusive commitment to the democratic process by all, for the sake of all the people of this island".

The Joint Declaration issued by the British Prime Minister and myself represents an historic and unprecedented opportunity for peace.

The Declaration is a charter for peace in Ireland. It sets out to demonstrate to every shade of opinion in Northern Ireland, that their political aims and ideals can be far more effectively pursued by purely democratic methods. We have not in any way prejudiced or predetermined a political settlement or a final political solution, which is a matter for negotiation between the two Governments and the democratic parties.

The purpose of this carefully balanced declaration is to provide a framework for peace. It is not designed to promote or to give an unfair advantage to either the Unionist or the Nationalist agendas. The Declaration is designed to show how democratic methods can be applied to the principles and ideals, which each community holds dear.

I am very gratified by the generally positive reaction in both Britain and Ireland, in the Dáil and in the House of Commons, and amongst most of the main constitutional parties in Northern Ireland, including the SDLP, the Alliance Party and the Ulster Unionists. There has also been a broad welcome from Church and community leaders, employers, trade unions, Chambers of Commerce, and many other groups both North and South. I also welcome the worldwide interest in and support for the success of the Declaration, including statements from President Clinton and President Delors and our European friends. Yesterday, I met the Chairman of the PLO Mr Yasser Arafat, and he has publicly expressed his support for the Declaration.

Indeed, I would like to quote Yasser Arafat's words as reported in yesterday's Evening Herald: "Peace can solve all issues, we have to remember that. All wars solve nothing. It is in the interest of the people that there should be peace. For every revolution there must be an end". Only yesterday, the military wing of the African National Congress decided to dissolve. In South Africa, in the Middle East, and two or three years ago in Central and Eastern Europe, there has been a recognition by leaders of stature, that the old sterile ideological conflicts must be brought to an end everywhere, and that a new spirit of peace and reconciliation must be brought to bear on the deep differences, which have caused immense human suffering.

The moment has come for the people of Northern Ireland too, to place behind them twenty-five years of tragedy, which has advanced nobody, and which will not advance the political interests of any community in the future either.

If the present situation is allowed to continue, everyone will be losers. The Union will not be any stronger, a united Ireland will not be any nearer. Indeed, it is quite possible for both communities, simultaneously to be far worse off than they are at present.

This historic Declaration is a serious attempt to get away from the zero-sum mentality, which has bedevilled all attempts to solve the Northern Ireland problem. This House, I believe, simply does not accept, nor do I believe, does the House of Commons, that one side can only be better off at the expense of the other, that Unionists can only flourish at the expense of Nationalists or vice-versa. In this Declaration, the British Government are not the enemies of Nationalist aspirations, nor are the Irish Government the enemies of Unionist ones. We must all recognize that there has to be a much greater spirit of mutual generosity on all sides.

I want to refute the notion that this Declaration in some way represents a reward for violence, or that any organization has "won". Neither Government has departed or backed down from any essential democratic principle or international obligation. What the Declaration does however is to draw out of the long-established positions of both Governments, whether implicit or explicit, many of the different possibilities contained within them, and the scope they provide for far-reaching political evolution and change. As Cardinal Daly said in an evocative speech at Westminster last week, some of the principles drawn from 'the vaults of British Government policy' provide a basis for the resolution of the problem. Ever since I was elected leader of

my party and Taoiseach, I have referred back to the Government of Ireland Act, 1920, and the creative evolutionary potential contained in that legislation balanced against the fact of continued partition for the present.

As for the notion of betrayal, my Government, too, feel a sense of responsibility towards the Unionist population. Nothing, that either I or John Major proclaimed on Wednesday, represents a betrayal of the democratic rights of the people of Northern Ireland. I have stated, and I now repeat, that neither the Government nor the people of this State have any desire to impose either by force, or by some form of political coercion, a united Ireland on an unwilling population and against the wishes of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland. Only a united Ireland based on clear agreement and consent is worth having.

I believe there is hardly anyone in Ireland today, who believes that unity is or should be on the immediate political agenda. There is no way round the task of first building better relationships, new trust, and developing the practice of co-operation between the two parts and the two communities in Ireland. Any attempt, whether political or otherwise, to move quickly in the direction of an united Ireland, in the absence of a basis of consent, would be totally counterproductive. But that does not mean, that the ideal should be abandoned as a long-term aim. Indeed, Irish unity, in the right conditions, would still be the almost universal wish of the people of this State.

The most pressing item on the political agenda, after peace, is to create an accommodation between Unionists and Nationalists in Northern Ireland and between North and South, within a broad framework of British-Irish co-operation. An atmosphere of peace will make that task much easier. If overall agreement at first proves difficult, then let us proceed by smaller steps in a balanced way.

I need not remind this House that democratic politics can be robust and vigorous in its own way. Political argument or combination does not represent coercion, and I cannot accept for one moment, the notion that the mere aspiration for a united Ireland represents coercion. Unionism has always been vigorously expressed. Nationalism has just the same entitlement, and it should not be forgotten that the current troubles began with an attempt to repress the Civil Rights Movement by force.

There have been some complaints that the Declaration has too much of an all-Ireland flavour. I do not believe myself that it is biased in either political direction. But I think Unionists should remember that their very name and their philosophy, relates to the political future of a part of this country. Unionism and Nationalism are both competing political philosophies that once applied to the whole of Ireland, and now mainly to a smaller part of it. It is difficult to deny that any two communities, that live together side by side, whether they are Whites and Blacks in South Africa, or whether they are the Israelis and the Palestinians in the Middle East, must find a mutual accommodation, and a way of working constructively together.

As I pointed out two days ago, since the beginning of the 17th century, there has been no real political accommodation between the main traditions on this island, although the Irish Volunteers and the United Irishmen attempted to create one 200 years ago. The awful consequences of that long and persistent failure have been with us, over the last 25 years. It is the task we now face.

Both John Hume and Chris McGimpsey have accepted the concept of an agreed Ireland. What the Declaration commits both Governments to work for is agreement between the people of Ireland, and to implement whatever agreement they reach.

As Peter Temple-Morris, the Co-Chairman of the British-Irish Parliamentary Body, has pointed out, the British Government may not be cast exactly in the role of persuaders, as far as Irish unity is concerned. But both they and we are certainly cast in the role of persuaders, in so far as achieving agreement between both traditions in Ireland is concerned and also in the pursuit of peace. The Declaration speaks of the role of the British Government being 'to encourage, facilitate and enable the achievement of such agreement over a period'.

One of the greatest concerns, that all of us have had, from time to time is that the requirement of consent, the guarantee, as it is variously called, seems to enable one community to refuse indefinitely, not just a united Ireland, but any political progress or accommodation. That is where the Declaration is helpful, when it makes clear that the British Government will work, together with the Irish Government 'to achieve such an agreement, which will embrace the totality of relationships'. There will certainly be quite legitimate persuasion exercised on all democratic parties to enter negotiations, and to stay in them until a satisfactory agreement is achieved.

The Declaration is a clear statement of an even-handed approach by the British Government to the question of change in the constitutional status of Northern Ireland. There may be some sentimental attachment, but there is no selfish British strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland. They are prepared to implement now and in the future the preferred wish of a greater number of the people to support the Union or a sovereign united Ireland.

The acceptance of the principle of self-determination may have been implicit in the settlement of 1920 and 1921. It has been explicitly accepted by the British Government for the first time now, and on the same conditions as then. They state that "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". They accept that the people of Britain would wish, in friendship to all sides, to enable the people of Ireland to reach agreement on how they may live together in harmony and in partnership, with full recognition of the special links between the peoples of Britain and Ireland.

It is unrealistic to expect that the right of self-determination in any country that has been partitioned for half a century or more should be exercised, except in accordance with the wishes of the people living in both parts. I have already given many examples of how this has occurred in Germany or would occur in China, Korea or Cyprus. The exercise of self-determination, in the manner set out in the Joint Declaration, represents the norm not the exception.

I do not know of any fairer statement, that, has been or could be made by the British Government with regard to Nationalist ideals than what is set out in paragraph 4 of the Joint Declaration. John Hume has correctly described it as the most comprehensive statement by a British Government on British-Irish relations in 70 years. I also believe the Irish Government have gone further than in any previous formal statement towards meeting Unionist fears and concerns.

There has been some argument as to whether the British Government recognises or denies the value and legitimacy of a united Ireland, phrases taken from a leaked draft document destined for Strand III of the Talks process. I regard such discussion as entirely theoretical. The fact is that there are no less than three references to the conditions in which a united Ireland can be achieved in paragraph 4, which is in the name of the British Government.

From the Irish Government's point of view, support for a united Ireland and support for the Union, are both equally legitimate political objectives, and both may be regarded as having value from different points of view.

Our aim must be to bring the most alienated sections of the Northern communities in from the cold. The Declaration stated that "the Irish Government would make their own arrangements within their jurisdiction to enable democratic parties to consult together and share dialogue about the political future". I went on to say that it was my intention that "these arrangements could include the establishment, in consultation with other parties, of a Forum for Peace and Reconciliation to make recommendations on ways in which agreement and trust between both traditions in Ireland can be promoted and established".

Both Governments believe that once there is a permanent end to violence, "democratically mandated parties which establish a commitment to exclusively peaceful methods and which have shown that they abide by the democratic process, are free to participate fully in democratic politics and to join in dialogue in due course between the Governments and the political parties on the way ahead".

I would now like to set out more formally the role that I envisage for the proposed Forum for Peace and Reconciliation, which is of course entirely a matter for the Irish Government and democratic parties. May I say that the approach I am setting out now differs in no way, from previous proposals I have put forward, and that much of the recent speculation has been ill-founded about what the Irish Government were pressing for in relation to an all-Ireland Convention.

In the light of the joint commitment to promote the objectives set out in the Joint Declaration, I have indicated to the British Prime Minister, my intention of establishing, in consultation with other parties, an Irish Forum for Peace and Reconciliation to consult and advise, as long as is necessary, on the steps required to remove the barriers of distrust, which at present divide the people of Ireland and which also, stand in the way, of the exercise by them of self-determination on a basis of equality. It will be open to the Peace Forum to make recommendations on ways in which agreement, in the spirit of the Report of the New Ireland Forum, and respect for the rights and identities of both traditions in Ireland, can be promoted and established. The Peace Forum will operate with full respect for the authority of the institutions established by law in the State. It will be a fundamental guiding principle of the Peace Forum that all differences between the Irish people relating to the

exercise of the right to self-determination, will be resolved exclusively by peaceful, political means.

The Peace Forum will be open to democratically mandated political parties in Ireland, which abide exclusively by the democratic process and wish to share in dialogue about Ireland's political future and the welfare of all its people. The Irish Government will approach the Peace Forum in a true spirit of openness and magnanimity.

Subject to discussions with other parties, the Peace Forum would be organised on similar principles to the New Ireland Forum. It would be open to any party in Ireland, just as the New Ireland Forum was, whether by way of membership, or by way of giving evidence to it. As its name suggests, its primary task is to remove barriers of distrust, and to begin the process of reconciliation.

The Forum would in effect provide a means to debate and devise appropriate alternative political strategies to violence, which will genuinely advance the cause of reconciliation and break down barriers, that lie in the way, of an agreed future. Such a debate, taking place among all strands of nationalism and hopefully a wider range of opinion, in the aftermath of a permanent cessation of violence, could be a very healthy exercise in advance of resumed talks between all political parties, Unionist and Nationalist. I see it in no way as a confrontational exercise, and it is not in competition with the talks process. There is no future, whatever, in going back down the road of old-fashioned 1940s style anti-partition campaigns. I am sure that view is shared throughout this House. We have to adopt a modern and enlightened approach.

The Government understand and indeed share, the desire of parties opposite to engage in future in more meaningful dialogue and co-operation with the Unionist community through a process of détente.

However, in my view peace is the first essential for better relationships on this island. If we want to be realistic, we have to guarantee that there will be a political process, once violence is permanently ended. The Forum could provide a useful input to wider negotiations. It will not be used to threaten anyone, just as the New Ireland Forum threatened no-one.

The Joint Declaration was the first stage in the peace process. The Forum for Peace and Reconciliation could be absolutely vital to reaching a second stage, and to achieving a permanent cessation of violence. While I understand some of the hesitations there may be about it, I would ask the parties in this House to consider it as a genuine contribution which they can make to the achievement of peace. It involves no concession of principles on anyone's part, as it is modelled on a body, in which nearly all parties here have previously participated. From time to time, there have been calls or suggestions from different sides that it might be reconvened. In the circumstances of a genuine cessation of violence, it could play an important role in the strengthening and consolidation of the spirit of democracy throughout this island. I do not underestimate the real difficulties and problems involved, but the achievement of a permanent, just and lasting peace is the objective that takes precedence over all others, as far as I am concerned: Peace is paramount.

Many other practical questions will arise, following a complete cessation of violence. The Irish Government will address these questions in a pragmatic spirit, in which the spirit of generosity and of justice must go hand in hand. Our overriding desire is to close for good this chapter in our history, while never forgetting those who have suffered. We will naturally seek the destruction of arms, as it is our duty under the law. But we should all be realistic enough to recognise that here, as in every situation round the world disarmament goes hand in hand with confidence-building.

I would now like to put on record briefly some of the history of the present peace initiative, which is not well known or understood, and which has had to remain largely confidential up till now.

I have spoken on many occasions of my first meeting as Taoiseach with Prime Minister John Major in February 1992, where we both made a resolution to try and bring peace to Northern Ireland during our term of office together and to spare the people of Northern Ireland another generation of violence.

In April 1992 with the assistance of John Hume, and also using some ideas put together over some considerable time by some Redemptorist priests committed to peace work in the Clonard Monastery in Belfast, I drew up in my office a first formal draft of a Joint Declaration to be made by the British Prime Minister and myself, designed to facilitate the beginning of a peace process and a permanent cessation of violence. The background was clear. On the indications given to me by John Hume and other responsible people, and indeed on the evidence of their own public

statements, Sinn Fein and the Provisional IRA were looking for an alternative peaceful strategy to violence. It will be noted from the date that the origins of this initiative long predated the surfacing in public of renewed meetings between John Hume and Gerry Adams in the spring of this year, which were a sequel to the SBLP-Sinn Fein dialogue in 1988.

Because the initiative involved not only a statement of how the legitimate rights and aspirations of those holding Republican ideals could be pursued, in a purely democratic fashion, but also a restatement of the obligations by which the Irish Government are bound vis-a-vis the requirement for the agreement and consent of a majority, it took fourteen months to finally settle a first formula. John Hume and I were satisfied that it would have a capacity to produce peace, but at the same time satisfy the basic requirements of the two Governments.

I would have to confess, however, that the initial document, submitted by me to the British Government last June, represented the outer limit of what the Irish Government could agree, consistent with our obligations. However, I formed the judgement that it was right to present, on my responsibility, a text to the British Government, that had the full support of John Hume, and that, if accepted, would bring a cessation of violence. I knew that subsequent discussions on it between the two Governments would be likely to substantially improve the document, while hopefully still retaining its capacity to be a vehicle for peace. The two central principles of the document, which balanced each other, was a recognition by the British Government of the Irish people's right to self-determination and a recognition by me, that this could only be exercised with the agreement and consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland.

In recent months, joint public statements between John Hume and Gerry Adams have provided public evidence of how far Sinn Féin has moved towards acceptance that progress can only be made by democratic means. In my view, this evidence of progress, even though clearly insufficient while violence continues, should have been more warmly welcomed. It should have been seen for what it is, as an important and vital stepping-stone on the road to peace. I believe, and John Hume believes, that the Joint Declaration is in keeping with the spirit of the joint Hume-Adams public statements, though the Joint Declaration is set in a broader framework.

In the development of the peace process over the last 18 months, John Hume has played an indispensable role through direct meetings and dialogue with the leader of Sinn Féin. Independently of that, I have also benefited from the advice and input of respected community leaders, whose sole vocation is to work for peace, and who have been able to interpret for me accurately shifts of thinking within both Sinn Féin and the IRA and the Loyalist paramilitaries.

Last June, John Major and myself decided to appoint a small group of officials to examine the initial draft Declaration. In the course of a number of meetings, a whole series of important and necessary improvements were discussed, which removed any ambiguities from the text and made explicit clear and unequivocal assurances that the democratic rights of the people of Northern Ireland would be fully safeguarded. By October, official discussions had made considerable progress. Since then I would add, in a series of contacts with a leader of the majority community in Northern Ireland, the Irish Government have made further radical improvements to the text, including the addition of whole new sections, some of which addressed to the concerns of the Unionist population.

At the end of October, the process unfortunately began to run into turbulence. One major problem was the tendency of the media to identify the discussions of the two Governments as focusing on the uncritical adoption of what was simplistically described as the Hume/Adams proposals, but which was in fact the original draft presented by me to the British Prime Minister in June. This created much distrust on the Unionist side. The enunciation of a number of principles by the Tánaiste, (although put forward primarily in the talks context), helped to dissipate an excessive media concentration on these. I made it clear in my Dáil statement on Northern Ireland, prior to the first Brussels meeting, that I welcomed the input of John Hume and Gerry Adams, which provided important elements, but that any initiative would have to be taken by the two Governments, whose responsibility would be to create, in their own broader terms, a framework for peace. This position was reflected in the Brussels communiqué, which was unfortunately presented afterwards in some quarters as a straightforward rejection of the Hume/Adams efforts for peace. All I had said in the Dáil was that it was not simply a question of adopting them.

While I believed that I had secured British agreement at Brussels to resume the initiative, I greatly regret the unfortunate impression created among the Northern Nationalist community for a couple of weeks afterwards that the Irish Government were abandoning the Nationalists. That was never the case. My sole objective

throughout was to protect and pursue a vitally important peace initiative, which I had put forward, and to which John Hume had contributed so much. It is of course a complete myth to suggest that I was so taken aback by the negative reaction in the North and at the Fianna Fáil Árd Fheis to the Brussels communiqué, that I hurriedly altered course again the following week. The truth is that I have never deviated one iota from the steady pursuit of the objective of achieving a formula for peace. John Hume and the community leaders to which I have referred were of course kept informed at all times of developments, but nevertheless, it was put to me that political leaders have to respond to public perceptions, even if they are different from the underlying realities.

However, some ten days after that first Brussels meeting, and after the next meeting of British and Irish officials, I was made aware of renewed difficulties, despite the space that I had attempted with some success to create for the British Government. This time, the difficulties centred on the acceptability of the contents of the document, in its revised state from the Unionist point of view. I had already undertaken to do what I could to try to ascertain and improve its chances of some degree of acceptance from within the Unionist community.

Throughout the last two months, I have made a determined effort to reassure the Unionist community by whatever means were open to me. When tension was running high and when murders of Catholics were virtually a daily occurrence, I conveyed through another respected intermediary, messages intended for the Loyalist paramilitaries, making it clear that in seeking peace, I was not seeking in anyway to predetermine or prejudice the shape of a political settlement. I specifically refuted any notion that the Irish Government were involved in some way or another in a pact to deliver peace in return for joint authority. These private messages reinforced public statements to the same effect. I also spoke to a number of leaders of the different Protestant Churches, and influential Northern journalists, as well as the leader of the Alliance Party, Dr. John Alderdice, who has adopted a most helpful and constructive attitude to this initiative throughout.

In response to the British difficulty, I took steps to ascertain what could reassure moderate opinion among the Northern Protestant/Unionist community, so avoiding what was alleged to be the mistake at the time of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, that no Unionist was ever consulted. I incorporated the vast majority of the recommendations I received into the text of the draft declaration. I also communicated in writing with James Molyneux, a political leader for whom I have

great respect, regardless of often profound political differences, and I authorised an individual trusted by us both to brief him at his discretion on my proposals, and I encouraged John Major to do the same. The Tánaiste and his office have met face to face with a number of leading Unionist politicians over recent weeks. While I never asked for or expected enthusiasm for the peace formula, I do believe that the achievement of peace in a manner that respects everyone's fundamental rights and identity is in everyone's interests. I welcome the political response from mainstream Unionism. I believe it will always be greatly to the honour of James Molyneaux and his colleagues that at the end of the day the attitude they adopted, helped this initiative for peace, notwithstanding their distaste for certain aspects of it.

I was deeply impressed and greatly encouraged by the tremendous yearning for peace shown on 25 November, when one of the largest ever demonstrations in Northern Ireland took place for peace. There was also a big response to a phone-in to the two Northern morning newspapers, and 2 million throughout the island stood for a moment's silence for peace at 1 o'clock. There have also been indications of strong support from the Northern business community.

As we came nearer to the achievement of a formula for peace, it was to be expected that the pressures on the two Governments would increase. There were for example two leaks of documents, one on the Irish side, the other on the British one, both of which could have upset the peace process, and indeed succeeded in doing so for a brief period.

The leaked Irish document was prepared as an Irish contribution to Strand III of the talks, assuming Government approval had been given, which it had not. The Irish Government are surely as entitled as any other party to the talks to submit whatever document we choose, and to put forward our own ideas, without provoking an adverse reaction. The essential difference between the talks document and the peace declaration is that the first would have been an Irish contribution to the formation of a joint position by the two Governments, whereas the peace declaration is intended to represent a careful balance of different views and interests and is essentially non-partisan in nature.

The merit of the peace initiative I have put forward has been to enable the British Government to negotiate only with another democratic Government. I want to repeat that the Irish Government have never acted as a proxy or conduit for the IRA,

and I would never put anything forward that was not consistent with our own fundamental position and obligations.

In the final stages, the British Prime Minister and myself had a series of meetings, four in all this autumn, as well as a number of communications both in writing, by emissary and by telephone. It was a delicate and often difficult negotiation. But at the end I believe we both achieved a very good result, with which we are both fully content. I believe the Prime Minister displayed considerable political courage in adopting this initiative, which was unusual in its approach.

I would like to pay tribute to the many Church and community leaders, and other people with a high sense of public duty and responsibility, who came to see me in confidence and who helped me form clearer judgements. For over 30 years I have been expanding my number of friends and business and political contacts in both communities in the North of Ireland. I have been to draw on this knowledge and experience.

In the final analysis this Joint Declaration is particularly addressed to the people and organisations on both sides who can most directly deliver peace. While none of us can ever condone the deeds committed over the past 25 years, I believe it is right to acknowledge what I believe are serious and courageous efforts that have been made for some time by some in the Republican leadership to find a path to peace out of the impasse. I believe when they examine the Joint Declaration closely, together with the proposal for a Peace Forum, which I have elaborated in more detail today, they should find that they provide the necessary elements for a peace process, that will create its own dynamic.

There is now an immense responsibility on many different leaders and among all of us to hold open this opportunity for peace, and to let people grasp it while it is there. A great deal hinges on the decision. Let us not set rigid new preconditions. Let us remember that it is better to end violence than to preach against it. There has never been, and there never will be, a better opportunity for peace. I commend the Joint Declaration to the House. The best Christmas message all political leaders could send to families in Northern Ireland would be the news of a lasting peace with justice for all.