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Statement by the Taoiseach,

Mr. Albert Reynolds, T.D.

Wednesday, 31 August, 1994 at 4.00 pm

Every Irish person at home and abroad will welcome with relief and thanksgiving the decision announced today of an end to the 25 year old IRA campaign. It is a day that many had begun to fear they might never see. We all hope that it will be swiftly followed by an end to paramilitary violence on all sides and consolidated by a gradual and general process of demilitarisation, and that it will facilitate the achievement of a comprehensive negotiated political settlement.

A long nightmare is coming to an end, where the legacy of history went so tragically wrong. While the IRA like others must have responsibility for their actions, and those that have had terrible human consequences, it would be simplistic to make them solely responsible for the national disaster that has struck this island over the last 25 years, holding the whole country back and poisoning relations even further in the North of Ireland.

The 1921 settlement gave independence to the people of this State and allowed the Northern Unionists to opt out. But it failed to provide enforceable protections for the rights of Northern Nationalists, with whose rights Unionists in the Stormont years never politically had to come to terms. Radical attempts to reform the system in the late 1960s and early 1970s ran into fierce resistance, which in time sparked the longest sustained use of physical force in our history, to try and solve the problem of partition.

Today there is a clearer realisation than ever before of the futility of attempting to resolve the differences between two

communities by force or to coerce one community into a mould set by the other, whether in Northern Ireland or Ireland as a whole. It has taken an exceptionally long time for the full realisation of this truth to come about and for it to be reflected in the actions of paramilitary organisations.

At a time when we are entering a new world, where old national antagonisms and rivalries have given way to increased partnership, it is time to move beyond replaying either the resistance to Home Rule of 1912-4 or the Irish freedom struggle of 1916-21. We must break out of outdated moulds, and face the future with imagination and flexibility, and adapt our inherited ideals to the circumstances and needs of today.

Today's announcement presents us with a great opportunity to break free from the stagnation and demoralisation caused by the prolonged violence of the past 25 years. We expect to see the complete cessation of violence implemented fully on the ground. It is on that understanding that Northern Republicans will be fully incorporated into the democratic process. Political and other progress will depend on confidence-building measures on all sides.

We are prepared to recognise in practical ways without delay the electorate mandate of Sinn Féin, on the basis that the complete cessation of IRA military operations will immediately become and remain a reality, and that the definitive commitment to the success of the democratic peace process is demonstrated to be such. But I believe this morning's IRA statement to be made in good faith, and that their strong tradition of discipline will positively contribute to this result. As history has shown, nothing is more corrosive of democracy than any attempt to combine the use of political violence, while claiming full rights of democratic participation.

The Government, since the Downing Street Declaration, made it clear at all times that we were not interested in half-measures, such as temporary or conditional ceasefires. The IRA statement, expressing their definitive commitment to the success of the democratic peace process and announcing a complete cessation of military operations, means that there can be no going back.

There is in any case no progress in Northern Ireland that can be advanced by any renewed recourse to violence. The democratic path, as we all know here, can be a thorny one, with no guarantee of continuous progress towards all one's objectives. It is rather a level playing-field, where conflicting ideas and visions of the future are canvassed for public support. The Downing Street Declaration does not guarantee or endorse any particular constitutional aspiration for the future, but it gives them all a chance of realisation without obstruction.

Both Governments remain firmly and unswervingly committed to the Downing Street Declaration as a framework for any further political progress. The Irish Government have not departed in any way, nor will it do so, from the obligation of consent as a balanced counterpart to the principle of self-determination. The cessation of violence involves no prejudice to the protection of the Unionist constitutional position, nor for that matter to the continued legitimate expression of Nationalist constitutional ideals.

One of the purposes of the Downing Street Declaration, in the paragraphs in my name, was to remove the fears of Unionists, which have led some of them in the past to behave in a prejudicial manner towards the rights of their Nationalist neighbours.

The atmosphere of peace presents a new and unique opportunity for Unionists and Nationalists to build up a new relationship

of trust and reconciliation in a vastly improved atmosphere, assuming that Loyalist paramilitaries respond favourably to the current situation. This would allow both communities to work together constructively, both within Northern Ireland and between North and South. Economic opportunities abound, where North and South working together, will achieve better results than competing against each other. A Single Market in Ireland within the European Single Market makes sense. Peace will help it to take shape.

When I became Taoiseach in 1992, indeed long before, I felt the continuation of violence to be an affront to decency and common sense, and was determined to do all I could to bring about peace. Peace was a powerful idea, whose time had come.

Last December, I described in some detail the background and the history of the steps that led John Major and myself to the Downing Street Declaration.

For over 20 years, successive Governments largely succeeded in protecting the stability of this State from attack. But the price of keeping a rigid distance from those involved in violence was that this State exercised little or no influence, other than a repressive one, on Republican thinking. In co-operation with John Hume and a respected clergyman intermediary, shortly after becoming Taoiseach, I took up and carried forward efforts to get to grips with the professed reasons for Republican violence, to see if ways could be found of satisfying principle, while dispensing with the need for violence. This was a task in which the previous Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Peter Brooke, had also engaged, and his statement that Britain had no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland was one of the foundation stones in which the whole exercise leading to the Joint Declaration was built, as it resolved one of the main issues in debate between the SDLP and SF in 1988.

It was a slow and patient task trying to reconcile important principles such as the right to national self-determination with the obligation the Government had accepted under an international agreement to seek consent. We had to find ways of bringing into balance traditional Republican philosophy with the recognised rights of the Unionist community, taking account of the movement away from simple majoritarianism as a means of resolving communal conflict. The Government above all have had to convince Republicans of the superior benefits of full participation in the democratic process to the continuation of armed struggle, and that if armed struggle were abandoned, they would be welcomed into the democratic arena, notwithstanding anything that may have happened in the past. We had to come to grips with the needs and psychology of a community that for years was effectively excluded from the political process, while retaining a firm grip on wider realities. The whole exercise has been fraught with risk, risk for me and risk for the Government. Yet without the effort and understanding and constructive engagement the stand-off and the violence might have continued almost indefinitely.

The participation, example and advice of John Hume was vital in this exercise. We all recognise his immense courage and persistence in a difficult and dangerous task.

We as a sovereign Irish Government, with a power of decision-making in our own jurisdiction as well as our privileged access to the British Government and other Governments and especially the US, also had a key role to play.

As is widely known, the concept of a Joint Declaration was put forward by us to the British Government in June 1993, following 14 months of slow and painstaking progress on a draft drawn up under my direction with the help of John Hume, with the benefit of his knowledge of the views of the Republican leadership. Some of the principles involved were expressed in

different but in parallel language in the joint Hume-Adams public statements. It fell to the Government to carry the initiative forward and negotiate it with the British Government, which was also a difficult but in the end a very worthwhile and rewarding undertaking.

As outlined to the House last December, I recognised the need, in order to overcome otherwise insuperable obstacles and difficulties, to broaden the Joint Declaration from a document dealing purely with Nationalist ideals and aspirations to one which encompassed equally Unionist and Loyalist ideals and aspirations in a balanced manner. This was the key to the unprecedented range of support given to the Joint Declaration last December from the Ulster Unionist Party and Alliance to the SDLP and including an all party consensus in this House.

The British Prime Minister, John Major, deserves our deep and lasting gratitude for his courage in agreeing to proceed with the initiative of the Declaration. I hope and believe that the end of the IRA campaign should be greeted with the same satisfaction in Britain and in the House of Commons as it will be on this side of the Irish Sea. It represents a major political achievement for all involved.

The Declaration has been criticised in its aftermath for devoting as many paragraphs to Unionist concerns as to the core constitutional issues of interest to Nationalists. But of course the equality agenda and the more immediate practical concerns of Northern Nationalists were also being pursued with the framework of the talks process, going on in parallel. I sought to address the more practical legitimate points of concern to Nationalists in my Irish Association speech at the beginning of the year.

The peace process and the talks process were never isolated from each other. The degree of progress made both in 1991 and

1992 and the subsequent progress of discussions between the two Governments more recently, now concentrated on the Framework Document, have created a process, in which all Northern political parties, including Sinn Féin, have an interest in participating in, in order to shape its outcome.

Tribute should be paid to the Tánaiste, Deputy Dick Spring, and his officials and the Secretary of State and his team for the momentum they have succeeded in imparting to the process, despite formidable political obstacles. Their work has had a significant and positive influence on the outcome of the peace process, just as the Downing Street Declaration has enriched and provided a new base for the talks process. Those in this House, who from time to time have seen the two as being in competition with each other and as being mutually exclusive, have entirely failed to grasp the positive impact and results that have come from pursuing both in parallel, where the pursuit of either one in isolation might have yielded much less.

The Declaration, while, in my opinion and in John Hume's, substantially the same, if more balanced, than the original proposal I had put to the British Government, was initially a disappointment to Northern Republicans, even though significant and positive formulations were acknowledged. Nevertheless, the very opening phrase of today's IRA statement recognises 'the potential of the current situation'.

We took the calculated risk of lifting Section 31 of the Broadcasting Act, in January, something for which a good case on libertarian principles could also be made, so that the problems and difficulties in the wake of the Downing Street Declaration could be more openly confronted and debated. Similarly, we agreed with the decision of President Clinton to grant a short term visa to Gerry Adams last winter, so as to allow him to meet directly in the US with influential Irish-American opinion, which has been a crucial influence on

advancing the peace process. I would like to thank the President for his constant support for the Irish peace process and the Joint Declaration, and likewise all our friends in America.

The Irish Government were not prepared simply to make the Declaration on a take it or leave it basis. We accepted that there could be a valid distinction between clarification and negotiation. We have not at any stage entered into any renegotiation of the Declaration. Indeed, difficult concepts, such as how self-determination applied in long partitioned countries, and how it operated in international law, badly required more detailed elucidation, which I gave. Every difficult point or issue or objection that was raised we tried to deal with to the best of our ability, so that there would not be valid reasons left unanswered as obstacles to fully embracing peace. The British Government and the Loyalist paramilitaries took encouragement from our example and also engaged effectively in giving or seeking clarification. We treated the Loyalists exactly the same as the Republicans. Our answers may not always have been liked, but they were consistent with our publicly stated policy positions. We have ensured that there is clarity about our policy and about the logical consequences of peace and normality so that Republicans in the light of that could determine for themselves how much common ground they perceived, and what path they would choose to pursue. There have, needless to say, been no backdoor political pacts or agreements.

Over the last few months, I have had to give an unprecedented number of speeches and interviews on Northern Ireland, as indeed has the Tánaiste. The main onus, over the last year, for keeping the peace process alive and carrying it forward, even when at times the prospects for success looked almost hopeless, has rested with the Irish Government.

But at times almost alone apart from my Government.

colleagues, I kept the faith in the possibility of peace. I knew that if I publicly wrote off the peace process, that would universally be regarded as the end.

I am particularly grateful for the steady support and understanding of our partners in Government and especially the Tánaiste, for an initiative that had begun before they joined Government, as well as for the active part he and his officials played in developing it further. Both of us have at all times been determined to be satisfied with nothing less than a permanent peace. I was also grateful for the support given to the Declaration by all sides of the House.

At the same time, I cannot refrain from remarking that in recent weeks and months since the Declaration that it became somewhat lonely, listening to charges of appeasement or suggestions that I had been wasting my time on a failed initiative at the expense of the talks process, or the insistence that I should recognise that the peace process was stone dead. Much has been made in another context of my ignoring advice. If I had taken some of the advice offered at certain times, I would have quickly sunk all hopes of peace.

Whatever my many critics thought, I owed a duty to the Irish people to try for peace, and if need be fail, rather than not try at all. Peace is a simple but powerful idea, whose time has come. There are sophisticated commentators in Fleet Street, who clearly doubt my grasp of complex ideas, particularly those that have to be expressed in long words and convoluted sentences. But they will perhaps allow I have at least had a clear and single-minded grasp of the idea of peace.

In the critical period ahead, where it is essential to consolidate peace quickly and to make it irreversible, I intend to apply the same activist and hands-on approach that I applied in the aftermath of the Declaration.

We must all of us, if we want peace, be prepared to welcome into the democratic process those who are no longer associated with a campaign of violence. Once normality is established, they will be treated like everyone else in proportion to their electoral mandate. I propose shortly to initiate bilateral discussions with all interested parties on the establishment of the Forum, which I envisage will meet before the end of October.

We will continue to work to bring to a conclusion a Framework Document on talks under discussion with the British Government. There will be an opportunity for negotiations to take place involving all the parties in Northern Ireland in a better atmosphere. All parties have a duty to consolidate peace. I do not think either community in Northern Ireland will thank parties who boycott the conference table, at the moment where has been the first real breakthrough to peace in the island in 25 years.

Because of the efforts I have had to make to bring Republicans in from the cold - I have also had useful contacts through an intermediary with Loyalist organisations, who also tend to be politically ignored - I have been subject to sustained political attack in recent times from some Unionist politicians. As someone who has had a lot of social and business contact with the Unionist Community, I believe I will nevertheless have done the Unionist people some service, if I have succeeded in helping bring to an end the IRA campaign of violence, which they see as primarily directed against them.

I would also like to pay tribute to the generally steadfast position adopted by the Unionist leader Mr. McLyneaux and his colleagues in resolutely dampening down attempts to arouse unjustified hysteria in the Unionist community, both in December and now. I cannot say the same for the wholly destructive policies of another brand of unionism, which in the recent past has tried to do everything in their power to

sabotage any reasonable prospects of peace. Some of the attitudes that have been adopted have undoubtedly fuelled the violence of the last 25 years. The presence of bigoted and sectarian attitudes that would be totally unacceptable in any other normal civilised society, such as the Deep South in America before the Civil Rights Movement or of South Africa under Apartheid, will have to be eradicated over time by the people of Northern Ireland themselves in the new situation.

The next task facing us is true reconciliation between Unionists and Nationalists, and the development of a pragmatic partnership of this island, even if that means accepting the continued existence of separate jurisdictions, at least for the time being. We have no interest in pressurizing or cajoling Unionists unwillingly into a united Ireland. Any such arrangement will eventually come about on the basis of broad agreement or not at all. To echo John Hume and Gerry Adams, no system is viable if it does not earn the allegiance of substantial minorities within it.

Nationalists are entitled to look for equality and parity of esteem in Northern Ireland. They are entitled to such links with the South which would be in the interests of all the people, but which would also reflect the Irish dimension or identity, as a counterpart to the continuing British constitutional link. One side cannot alone determine the whole character of Northern Ireland. What reasonable argument is there to deny the rights of Nationalists to legitimate institutional expression of their identity? Unionist leaders have to educate their community on the need for compromise, just as John Hume and I have spent much patient time in trying to persuade Northern Republicans to engage exclusively in the democratic process.

Tomorrow represents potentially the beginning of a new era in Ireland. I hope that an all-round peace can be established shortly, so that the litany of violent death will be over for

good. Well over 3,000 people have lost their lives in a needless conflict. If the violence were to continue at the same level over the next 25 years, another 2,500 would die. We must respect and remember, for a long time to come, the grief and sacrifice of all those who have died, and the deep wounds that have been left among those friends and relatives. Violence has directed scarce and much needed resources away from more useful social economic and social purposes.

Peace will create a new future for the whole of Ireland, a dynamic future that we have not seen since the 1960s. The fact that we too, like South Africa and the Middle East and Eastern Europe, can come to grips and crack our own apparently insoluble problems, will increase our international standing and be an important boost to national confidence North and South.

I know that President Clinton, who has played a very important role in his support for peace, is envisaging economic assistance for reconstruction and investment in Northern Ireland and on both sides of the border, as is President Delors and the European Union. The peace dividend will be valuable. As we move towards peace, we can be confident that we have the goodwill and support of the international community.

Let us all make the most of a new opportunity, the opportunity literally of a life-time. Let 1 September 1994 go into the annals as one of the most important dates in Irish history. Let us all inside and outside this House share the determination that from here on we will go on forward (and not back). There have been enough sacrifices. Let no more generations suffer in this way. Ireland has the capacity to be one of the finest countries in the world. From today, that is now again a real opportunity.