

JOINT COMMUNIQUÉ

British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference

FARMLEIGH, 22 JANUARY 2004

1. A meeting of the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference was held at Farmleigh, Dublin, on 22 January 2004.
2. The Irish Government was represented by the Joint Chair, Brian Cowen T.D., Minister for Foreign Affairs, who was accompanied by Tom Kitt T.D., Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs. The British Government was represented by the Joint Chair, the Rt. Hon. Paul Murphy, MP, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, who was accompanied by the Rt. Hon. Jane Kennedy, MP, and the Rt. Hon. John Spellar, MP, Ministers of State at the Northern Ireland Office. The Garda Commissioner and the Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland also attended.

General Political matters

3. The Conference reviewed political developments, including developments since the Assembly elections in November and the ongoing efforts to secure a working Assembly and the formation of an inclusive Executive, based on cross-community support. The Conference agreed that it was vital to continue work to encourage renewed trust and confidence in a stable, positive and secure environment.
4. The Conference reaffirmed its commitment to the full implementation of the Agreement. It discussed preparations for the forthcoming review of the operation of the Agreement, including recent contacts with the political parties in Northern Ireland.
5. There was an exchange of views on North-South matters. The Conference re-affirmed that the operation of the North/South Bodies and the previously mandated work programme of the North/South Ministerial Council would continue on a care and maintenance basis, and agreed that there were considerable practical mutual benefits to be derived from co-operation between both parts of the island. The ongoing work of the British-Irish Council was commended and the Conference noted the success of the fifth summit meeting, hosted by the Welsh Assembly Government, in Cardiff on 28 November 2003, and attended by the Taoiseach and the Prime Minister.

Security issues

6. The Conference reviewed the current security situation. It welcomed the reduction in violence in 2003, but noted with concern the increase in paramilitary violence experienced this month and discussed ways of dealing with it. The prospects for further normalisation were

discussed. The British Government indicated that it would ask the Independent Monitoring Commission to report on normalisation in parallel with its report on paramilitarism.

7. The Conference recognised that continuing paramilitary crime, including racketeering, and threats of violence, were major public concerns. Both Governments underlined their commitment to tackling such crime in all its forms. The excellent ongoing cooperation between the Criminal Assets Bureau and the Assets Recovery Agency was acknowledged. It was agreed that both Governments would discuss ways of improving cross-border co-operation and enhancing its effectiveness.

8. The Ombudsman's report on the murder of Seán Brown was also discussed and the Chief Constable briefed both Governments on the steps which would now be taken in response to it.

9. The situation in Maghaberry Prison was reviewed, in particular the progress made toward the implementation of the recommendations of the Steele Review. The Conference deplored the ongoing campaign of intimidation and threat towards prison officers.

Criminal Justice / Human Rights / Inquiries

10. The Conference discussed criminal justice matters, including the provisions of the Justice (Northern Ireland) Bill and the proposed International Agreement on co-operation, which it is hoped to sign soon. Both Governments welcomed the development of proposals for increased co-operation in areas such as the exchange of information on registered sex offenders, liaison on drugs, crime reduction, joint conferences and research.

11. The Conference discussed Human Rights issues, including those matters mentioned within the Joint Declaration. It was agreed that steps should be taken to ensure their advancement at the earliest opportunity. Given the important role of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission in promoting the human rights agenda outlined in the Agreement, both Governments agreed that the current difficulties relating to the Commission must be quickly resolved. The Conference also reaffirmed both Governments' support for the establishment of an independent forum on a proposed Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland.

12. In their discussion on the Cory, Barron and Stevens reports, both Governments recognised the widespread public concern about allegations of collusion. The Conference acknowledged the need for the four remaining Cory reports to be published as soon as possible.

Joint Declaration

13. The Conference reviewed the commitments made in the Joint Declaration, which are not conditional on acts by others. As agreed at the Conference meeting on 2 July 2003, the Governments are committed to taking forward these areas within designated time-frames. The Conference emphasized the importance of the delivery of those wide-ranging commitments and directed officials to take these forward and report back to the next meeting of the Conference.

14. The Conference acknowledged that progress had been made in advancing a number of issues contained in the Joint Declaration. For instance, the British Government confirmed that one of the equality commitments, a review of the operation of the equality duty on public authorities, will be initiated in the coming weeks. In addition, the Irish Government reported to the Conference that the European Convention on Human Rights Act came into effect on 1 January 2004.

Recruitment to civil service

15. The Irish Government raised concerns relating to the nationality requirements that restrict recruitment to certain civil service posts within the Northern Ireland Civil Service. The Conference noted that the current nationality requirements would be considered in the light of the progress of the Crown Employment (Nationality) Bill 2004, currently before Parliament.

Date of next meeting

16. The Conference agreed to meet again in March.