



## NORTHERN IRELAND Information Service

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### THE ANGLO-IRISH AGREEMENT AND PROSPECTS FOR 1986

It gives me great pleasure to speak this evening to such a large gathering of people from both sides of the Irish sea. With all our different backgrounds we share a deep concern to improve relations among the inhabitants of our two islands. At the beginning of 1986 we face great challenges but also great opportunities. We shall be discussing them during the next day or so. And so I am glad to have the opportunity now to preface this Conference with the British Government's views on where we stand in Northern Ireland and what might lie ahead.

The Anglo-Irish Agreement, which was signed by the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach on 15 November, was a major event. The Agreement has the potential to benefit the people of both countries, the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, and particularly those who live in Northern Ireland. It might be helpful if I recall briefly why we began, with the Irish Government, to search for a way in which together we could help improve political stability and seek ways to end the terrorist violence which has inflicted such suffering and damage throughout these islands.

There has been over a decade of stalemate between the unionist and nationalist parties in Northern Ireland. We believed that it was

pursued. We hope thereby that they might be emboldened to inch away from their traditional, defensive and exclusive political positions. We wanted to encourage the constitutional parties to start to work out how they could administer Northern Ireland together.

This objective was summarised in the Communique following the Chequers Summit in November 1984 when the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach agreed that the identities of both the majority and the minority communities in Northern Ireland should be recognised and respected, and reflected in the structures and processes of Northern Ireland in ways acceptable to both communities.

And so after many months of negotiation we have the Agreement signed last November. I am pleased to say that it has been generally welcomed in these islands and abroad as an imaginative and practical act of co-operation by two Governments which desire peace and stability. Not unexpectedly, it has been derided by the Provisionals, and the IRA has continued to pursue its terrorist operations, particularly in the border areas. For different reasons it is opposed by the unionist parties. A number of myths have already grown up about what the Agreement exactly means. Some flow from genuine misunderstanding; some from a deliberate desire to mislead. I hope therefore that you will forgive me if I say a few words about what the Agreement contains.

The Agreement has three essential components. The first and most fundamental is the acceptance by both countries of the majority's right to determine the future constitutional status of Northern Ireland. The unionist leaders oppose the Agreement, but not I

assume this part of it. The principle of consent and its acceptance by the Republic is central to the unionist case. It is a bulwark for their position. The second component of the Agreement involves cross-border co-operation, particularly against terrorism. Unionists have long called for improvements here, so I assume that they do not oppose this either. What they do object to is the third component, which deals with the way in which the minority's views can be put forward. This is by means of the Intergovernmental Conference in which the Irish Government can put forward views on Northern Ireland matters of interest to the minority community.

We have had three meetings of the Conference. At the first we discussed security co-operation between the two Governments. This is something to which the British Government attach the highest importance. And I would have thought that everyone would have accepted that it was a good thing for Ministers, with the Chief Constable of the RUC and the Commissioner of the Garda present to focus on cross-border co-operation against terrorism. We also discussed the development of a programme of measures to improve relations between the security forces and the minority community in Northern Ireland. The importance of a police presence with the Armed Forces in all operations which involve direct contact with the community was emphasised as was the need for the security forces to discharge their duties evenhandedly. The Chief Constable of the RUC informed the Conference that, like a number of other UK police forces, he would introduce as soon as possible in 1986 a Code of Conduct which would include such matters.

There can be no question of not wishing to hear the unionists views on all matters affecting Northern Ireland. But if their elected representatives absent themselves from Parliament and continue to boycott the Government, then it does become more difficult. The first thing that I did back in September on becoming Secretary of State for Northern Ireland was to invite the leaders of all the main parties to come and talk to me. Yet Dr Paisley refused, and now he is loudest in his claims that the Government refuses to listen to the unionists.

The unionists cannot go on simply saying no, they must say yes to something. They themselves have recognised that they cannot just go back to where they were. The majority of people in Northern Ireland want to remain in the union. It is surely inconsistent for their leaders to base a campaign in defence of the union on rejection of the will of the United Kingdom Parliament expressed by an overwhelming majority. During these by-elections they have a duty to outline what sort of future they want. They should then reinvolve themselves in the political process not only of Northern Ireland, but of the country as a whole.

They should think seriously again about how they can play a more direct part in governing Northern Ireland. If they so object to the role of the Irish Government through the Intergovernmental Conference then the remedy to a large extent lies in their own hands because the Conference will not cover the affairs of a devolved administration. The opportunity to resume greater responsibility themselves is there to be grasped, in both Jim Prior's 1982 Act

which set up the Assembly and in the Agreement itself. If they will think constructively about how one could be set up in a way which allows the minority a fair role, then they will find us ready to discuss it with them.

We believe that devolution is the way to go, and the Irish Government is pledged to support us in this. We look not just to the unionists, but very much to the nationalists as well to pursue this opportunity. Now that the Agreement is in place, the SDLP must not sit back. The unionists believe that the nationalists see the Agreement as a substitute for devolution. The SDLP should now find ways of showing the unionists that they really mean it when they say that they are interested in making Northern Ireland work. There are numerous openings for them to do so. Mr Hume has said that he is ready to talk to the unionists at any time. I hope that they will take him up on that promise, and see if at last we can return a real share of the government of Northern Ireland to its people.

I am under no illusion that the months ahead will be easy or that progress will come quickly. This Government's efforts will be directed towards creating a better society for all the people of Northern Ireland. We shall continue to discharge our responsibilities to both parts of the community fairly and, I hope, sensitively. And as we do so, we shall turn with interest for stimulus, education and perhaps encouragement to the ideas and views which I know will be exchanged with customary frankness and humour during this Conference.