

ARTICLE BY THE PRIME MINISTER FOR "SUNDAY LIFE"

DEMOCRACY AND DIALOGUE

Of the issues I have faced over the past three years, one has stood out above all others. One has touched the deepest emotions of people throughout the United Kingdom. One has threatened the values we stand for and the way of life we believe in. There is no issue more important than ending violence in Northern Ireland.

I refuse to accept that the people of Northern Ireland should not enjoy peace just as much as the people of any other part of the United Kingdom.

And I refuse to believe that peace can only come at the expense of their constitutional or basic human rights. In a democratic society, those rights are inviolable.

It is because of these beliefs that I worked for the Joint Declaration of 15 December.

I cannot promise peace to Northern Ireland. I cannot say when it will come. I shall never give up trying for a just and peaceful settlement. But the decision to cease violence does not lie in my hands.

What I can say is that there will never be a better time for that decision. Now is the time for all the people of Northern Ireland to reflect on what lies behind, and what could lie ahead.

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I spoke on television the other day of the poison of history. Of how blood has been spilled in the name of the past. But history has its lessons, too. Does Northern Ireland want endlessly to recycle the history of the past 25 years? Can it bear to repeat the agonising history of this autumn, of the Shankill and Greysteel?

The answer is obvious. That is no sort of future for those who are now growing up in Northern Ireland. It is no future for anyone. And there is an alternative.

Northern Ireland has abundant assets. It has industrious and highly educated people. It has strong businesses. It has a place in the European market. It has outstandingly beautiful countryside. It could be a magnet for investors and tourists.

In short, with an end to violence, Northern Ireland would have everything it takes to enjoy enviable prosperity. This is no idle dream.

The Joint Declaration could point to precisely that future. If the British and Irish Governments, for all their past differences, can find common ground in this document, so, I believe, can the two sides of the community in Northern Ireland.

What does the Joint Declaration say?

Does it undermine Northern Ireland's place in the Union? It does not. It goes further than that. It reaffirms our constitutional guarantee, written into law, that Northern Ireland's status as part of the United Kingdom will not change without the consent of a majority of the people who live there.

Does it undermine the right of the people of Northern Ireland to determine their own future? It does not. It strengthens that right. In the Joint Declaration, the Taoiseach says 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". What could be clearer than that?

I support the Union. I have always supported the Union. That is my personal right. But I shall not seek to impose my view on the greater number of the people of Northern Ireland if they decide otherwise. And the Declaration reaffirms their right to do so. So long as it is their wish to remain in the United Kingdom, the British Government will proudly uphold that wish.

Does the Joint Declaration suggest that Britain is indifferent to Northern Ireland? If upholding the rights of the Northern Irish people; or supporting their economy; or fighting for their security; or trying to make peace is indifference, I plead guilty.

Does the Joint Declaration mean joint authority? Read it. There is not the merest whiff of joint authority anywhere in its seven pages. Joint authority was not suggested and would never have been given.

The Joint Declaration is about none of these things. It is about consent. It is about reconciliation. It is about co-operation - between the two sides of the community, and between the North and the South.

It is a document designed to strengthen the democratic process. Northern Ireland's future should lie through the ballot box and in the hands of constitutional politicians.

The Declaration proposes a future for Northern Ireland based on the will of its

people. A future free from coercion. A future in which all the people who live there can share as equal citizens under the law. The Declaration recognises that both nationalists and unionists have every right to their point of view, to put it forward and have it heard. It acknowledges that they have a tradition of their own, and cultural and historical roots which deserve equal respect.

And, yes, it also makes an important offer to Sinn Fein: an invitation to them to join in the debate on Northern Ireland's future, having shown that they have given up violence for good.

Our invitation is clear and specific. Three months after a cessation of violence, the British Government is ready to enter an exploratory dialogue with Sinn Fein. We are ready to talk to them at that time about how they can come to play their part peacefully in the public and political life of Northern Ireland.

The Irish Government is also prepared to talk to them, after a cessation of violence, through a new body, the "Forum for Peace and Reconciliation". This will not be a joint structure. It will be established by the Irish Government alone. The Irish will invite other parties, but the decision will be theirs on whether or not to take part.

With growing vigour, people in Northern Ireland have been calling for peace. This has been the message from public figures, church leaders, community leaders, from people I have met on the streets of Coleraine and Larne.

Peace will not come unless both sides of the community believe they will get fair treatment.

It will not come unless they agree to talk to each other.

It will not come unless they have a means of expressing legitimate views without violence.

That is what the Joint Declaration offers.

My advice is to read it. Form your own judgement.

Ask yourself: is this a better way?

Ask what future you want. Ask if you can see any justification for the violence to go on.

I believe you will not.