

PRIME MINISTER/MR REYNOLDS - JOINT PRESS CONFERENCE - LONDON -
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TRANSCRIPT OF JOINT PRESS CONFERENCE
GIVEN BY THE PRIME MINISTER, MR JOHN MAJOR,
AND THE IRISH PRIME MINISTER, MR ALBERT REYNOLDS,
IN LONDON
ON WEDNESDAY, 15 DECEMBER 1993

PRIME MINISTER:

Let us start with a brief opening statement, we will then take a few questions, there will not be too many questions for the reason Gus just gave, we both have to prepare and subsequently make statements in Parliament this afternoon.

About two years ago the Taoiseach and I met in Downing Street and agreed on that occasion that we would work together towards a lasting political settlement in Northern Ireland. Since then we have both met and spoken on many occasions. Today was our fourth meeting in the last six weeks and our third meeting in the last twelve days. The results of this work are in the Downing Street declaration which we have just issued and which I hope you all now have a copy of.

A month ago I told the Parliament that Northern Ireland would remain at the head of the government's priorities. When I said that I meant it literally. The Taoiseach and I have pursued an idea which was obvious, simple and yet extremely difficult to

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accomplish. The idea was simply this, that we would bring together the positions of the British and Irish governments in a single statement to demonstrate that there is no excuse, no justification and no future for the use of violence in Northern Ireland. The lives of the past generation in Northern Ireland have been blighted by violence and hatred. There are scars there that will not easily be forgotten and will not easily go away. We need a better way in the future for the next generation.

Today, with this declaration, we appeal to that next generation to take the way that we are setting out. The declaration reflects the belief of both governments but it does not compromise the principles of either government. We believe that the people of both traditions in Northern Ireland can stand with us on the grounds we have set out in this declaration. We do not ask them to compromise their beliefs, their aspirations or their democratic rights, indeed we seek to enhance those rights, to create an environment in which they can go about their business, their own affairs, their own lives, their own future, free from fear and free from coercion.

What in practice does the Joint Declaration say? It says that reconciliation must be founded on consent, it promotes cooperation at all levels, it makes no pre-judgments. The British government will uphold the democratic wish of a greater number of the people of Northern Ireland on whether they prefer the Union or to support a united Ireland.

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The Taoiseach, for the Irish Government, declares that it would be wrong to attempt to impose a united Ireland in the absence of the freely given consent of the majority of people in Northern Ireland. This is underpinned by the British government's constitutional guarantee, reaffirmed in the Joint Declaration, that Northern Ireland's status as part of the United Kingdom will not change without the consent of the majority of people who live there.

The declaration supports the rights and the freedoms which are fundamental to both sides of the community - freedom of political thought and religion; the right to pursue national aspirations and constitutional change by democratic and peaceful means; the right to live where one chooses and the right to equal opportunity.

It closes no doors except the door to violence and illegality. And crucially it opens the door to those who abandon violence, to those who for decades have shut themselves out. If the Provisionals will end and renounce violence for good, the British government is prepared to enter into preliminary exploratory dialogue with Sinn Fein within three months when cessation of violence has been clearly established.

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And the Joint Declaration reinforces very strongly the three stranded political talks which have made significant progress over the last two years, a process that involves both of our governments and all of the constitutional parties.

The Joint Declaration is designed to strengthen the position of elected constitutional politicians throughout the community. It is a declaration for democracy, for constitutional behaviour, for dialogue, consent and freedom under the law.

I cannot promise you today that the Joint Declaration will bring peace, that does not lie within my hands, but those who do not respond to it will show that they prefer violence for its own sake because they are now offered a democratic alternative. I hope those who have turned to violence over the last quarter of a century will listen to the voices of their own people. And perhaps in particular let them respond to the challenge that Cardinal Daley set out here in Westminster just a fortnight ago: "Now is the time" he said "and now is the chance for them to end violence permanently and to commit themselves unambiguously to the democratic process." They have now, as never before, an opportunity hitherto closed to them to enter fully into the democratic process. If they lose this opportunity it may never come their way again. We believe there is such an opportunity, we hope they will take it.

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TAOISEACH:

This declaration is the product of work between the two governments which began early in 1992, it has been worked out by the two governments on their own terms and under their own responsibility but it has benefited from consultations which we have had with a wide range of opinion in both communities in Northern Ireland.

We believe it offers a framework for lasting peace, achieved on terms which in no way infringe the fundamental principles to which we are both committed. It is a fully balanced document which safeguards the rights and basic concerns of both traditions. We cannot have winners and losers if we want lasting peace.

It is fair to all and threatens nobody. Rather it represents an opportunity for everybody to accept that our differences can be fully and satisfactorily addressed and solved through the political process and that violence should have no place since it only deepens the differences between two communities. We hope this historic opportunity for peace will be taken.

We want to build on the wishes of both peoples to lay to rest the conflicts of the past and make a new beginning based on the fundamental principles of agreement and consent. The declaration recognises on behalf of the British government that it is for the people of Ireland alone, north and south, on the basis of consent, freely and concurrently given, to exercise their right of

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self-determination to bring about a united Ireland if that is their wish. It recognises equally, on behalf of the Irish government, that this right must be achieved and exercised with and subject to the agreement and consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland. It makes clear, in short, that the British government is in no sense an enemy to the rights of the nationalist tradition and that the Irish government is in no sense an enemy to the rights of the Unionist tradition.

We believe this framework offers all traditions in Ireland the basis to agree that our differences can now be negotiated and resolved exclusively by peaceful political means. That decision would prejudice no position or principle for either tradition.

It would be an inestimable gain for all since it would enable us to deal with the many practical issues of future structures against a background of peace and with a greater prospect of success. We believe that in an atmosphere free of violence, or the threat of violence, the prospect of a lasting agreement being reached between both traditions in Ireland would be enormously enhanced.

I said recently that the violence in Northern Ireland had led to walls of wilting flowers and an eternity of tears. If this declaration for peace helps to dry those tears, if it helps to replace the wilting flowers with new growth then we can ask no more.

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QUESTION (Michael Brunson, ITN):

Could I ask you both what is your message this morning to those Unionists who have already stood outside Downing Street and denounced this document as treachery, given that people like Dr Paisley do have the ear obviously of a part of the Unionist tradition?

PRIME MINISTER:

Let me answer that first. It is intriguing that the document has been denounced before it has been read. I think my first message to those people who are concerned is that they should read the document and see what is in it. I understand the concerns that Dr Paisley had, I have seen his letter now. He refers to the murder of an RUC officer. I understand that, he is concerned about that murder and I am concerned about that murder. My concern extends to wanting to take action to make sure that murders like that do not occur in the future. And so my message to those who are not yet convinced is they should read the declaration. It really is time for Ireland, politicians and people alike, not just to look back at their history but to look forward to their future, and that is what I hope they will do.

TAOISEACH:

Insofar as I am concerned, the killing of police officers in Five Mile Town, the killing of innocent people at Liganeal (phon), they are all killings too many as far as we are concerned. Our exercise here today and what we have been engaged in for the last

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2 years is to try and change the position so that there will not be a single more death in Northern Ireland.

QUESTION:

Could I ask you both the same question. Against the backdrop of the Hume/Adams document, what is in this document you think we should convince Gerry Adams to go to the IRA and say "Stuff it"?

TAOISEACH:

We have had 25 years of violence, violence has not succeeded, it has shown to be futile, it has not improved the position of either community, in fact it has left a long trail of real problems in most families that have been affected by the violence. Surely after 25 years it is time to look back at their record of success or failure and I suggest that it has not improved the position of either community. That is why we are saying and giving a very clear signal in this declaration today, that the two governments are saying to both communities, let us have a new beginning, there is a different way than the way that has been pursued for the last 25 years. We believe this offers you an historic opportunity to come into the political process and both governments have clearly signalled that neither government is an enemy to the traditions and the aspirations of either and consequently all the problems can be solved in the political process, the doors are open to the political process for the first time when we have a real cessation of violence.

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PRIME MINISTER:

Twenty-five years of violence have produced no advance for anyone and a lot of misery for everyone. What is in this document is the clearest possible indication that providing the IRA are prepared to renounce violence for good then Sinn Fein will be able to join exploratory talks preparatory to entering the main talks, that is perfectly clear in the document.

QUESTION (Peter Snow, Newsnight):

Prime Minister, does this document represent a distancing of the British government from Northern Ireland, is the beginning of an attempt to disentangle Britain from Ireland and how do you reassure the Unionists that this is not caving into the IRA?

PRIME MINISTER:

I think that is one of the more simple questions I will get today. The commitment by the British government to the Northern Ireland's constitutional guarantee is reaffirmed in this document and acknowledged by the Taoiseach, that constitutional guarantee is rock solid, has been and is rock solid. For so long as the majority of the people in Northern Ireland wish to remain in union with the United Kingdom, that position will be wholly supported by the United Kingdom government. Far from distancing ourselves from the problems of Northern Ireland, the bloodshed and murder in Northern Ireland has been a misery both to the Nationalist and the Unionist community in Northern Ireland for a quarter of a century.

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What the British government is doing is not stepping away from that problem but stepping forward to try and find a way of ending that problem. And I think the extent to which we have done that has been helped by the way we have been able to enter into constructive dialogue with the constitutional parties in the north and with the government of the Republic of Ireland.

QUESTION:

Taoiseach, does the document go as far as you would have wished in acknowledging the aspirations and identities of both northern communities, particularly the Nationalists, and also the legitimacy and value of Irish unity?

TAOISEACH:

I think it is quite clear from the document that both governments approached it, that we had to produce the end product as being balanced between the concerns, the identities, the aspirations and the traditions of both communities. And I think on any objective analysis we have succeeded in producing that very delicate balance, where both governments acknowledge the legitimate aspirations and objectives of both communities, where we have confirmed the position of the Anglo-Irish agreement that there will be no change in the status of Northern Ireland without a majority of the people of Northern Ireland there, that it is a matter for the two communities, having put violence behind them, to sit down and work out a new future, whatever that future may be, whether it is a future of agreed new structures, whether it is

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a united Ireland, whether the majority want to stay in the UK. Whatever agreement the communities and their political leaders work out around the table, both government are committed to accept and support that position.

So it is quite clearly setting out a very balanced situation. If there were to be the wrong balance struck on either side then I think we would not be doing a good day's work for the end objective that we want to achieve, and that is peace.

QUESTION (John Sergeant, BBC):

If I could ask you both, what do you think realistically now are the chances for peace in Northern Ireland and is it reasonable to talk about peace before Christmas?

TAOISEACH:

I have never spoken about peace before Christmas, I have always spoken about the beginnings of peace before Christmas and I think today's declaration is the first step in that beginning of putting together a framework that can indeed produce a process that can lead to peace. Violence in Northern Ireland comes from two communities. First of all we have the Provisional IRA who have been engaged in violence and we have the Loyalist violence which they say themselves on innumerable occasions is reactive to the Provisional IRA violence. So consequently if the message we are sending out here today that doors are open to the dialogue and political process for the people of violence, and if you can stop

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violence on the one side, then we have public statements on many, many occasions from Loyalist violence to say that theirs is reactive and consequently the validity of continuing would no longer exist. That is the position we are faced with and indeed we have set out a balanced declaration to attract support for the cessation of violence, back to the process of dialogue and let us get on with ordinary people living their lives as they want it, free of fear or coercion.

PRIME MINISTER:

We have an option for peace, whether that option is picked up lies with the men of violence, not with us. I hope they will pick it up that it is for them, I cannot compel them to do so, I simply say the option is there in a way it has not been before, I hope they will have the wit to take it.

QUESTION (Norman Stockton, Ulster TV):

Prime Minister, isn't Britain now in the position of a marriage partner who says I am only staying with you until the children have grown up, in fact they are virtually finished with Northern Ireland in terms of interest, whereas the Irish government seems to have a contrary view? And in a sense hasn't the Conservative Party been dragged kicking and screaming, after all these years, to the same position as the British Labour Party?

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PRIME MINISTER:

I think the answer to that is no in both cases. To take your own particular analogy, the position we are in is saying to anybody who wants to stay in our home they can stay in our home for as long as that is their wish, and that is what the constitutional guarantee is about and that has been the position of the Conservative Party and successive British governments for a long time.

QUESTION:

... from an Irish government perspective, and given that you are privy to the contents of the Hume/Adams report, do you believe that it will lead to a cessation of IRA violence?

TAOISEACH:

We have said, both of us here today, that we have done our job, we have produced a balanced declaration that sends very clear signals to both communities as to the new direction in which both governments want to see them travel. It is a matter for the men of violence to assess what is in this document, to look at the clear signals that have been given by both governments that doors can be opened for them if they want to join the political dialogue and I am quite certain that they in their own minds must know that the last 25 years of violence has been futile as far as trying to attain the objectives that they have been seeking. Those objectives can now be achieved over a period of time by agreement between people and this joint declaration is grounded on consent

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and agreement and people have to work for that agreement, work on both sides, in both communities, both governments, political leaders on both sides. Everybody has a role to play in this and I think that they should listen to the real yearning for peace that exists not alone in both communities in Northern Ireland but indeed throughout the whole island of Ireland and indeed elsewhere as well.

So it is up to them to grasp that opportunity to listen to the people from where they have got support in the past and let us hope that they take that decision that indeed everybody wants them to take.

QUESTION (Peter Reynolds):

You say that the position is on what the IRA should do now, but what other structure are you going to have to follow up this general declaration and what happens to the existing dialogue within the Province between the NIO and the constitutional parties, how would you follow it up now?

PRIME MINISTER:

The constitutional talks both continue and intensify, that is agreed, indeed stated in the document.

QUESTION:

Will there be a Select Committee on Northern Ireland and if so, how does the Taoiseach feel about it?

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TAOISEACH:

As far as I am concerned the business of the House of Commons is a matter for the House of Commons and not for me.

PRIME MINISTER:

And recommendations on this matter are for the Procedure Committee of the House of Commons.

QUESTION (Adam Boulton, Sky):

Doesn't your concentration on violence suggest that in fact you would not have come this far without the IRA violence and what would you say to many people who may be horrified that after all the killing effectively you have given irreversible political legitimacy to the Republican movement?

PRIME MINISTER:

We indicated two years ago, you probably have in mind the dreadful events of the last few months like Warrington and areas like that, I think you will have heard both the Taoiseach and me say some time ago that we embarked upon this course when we met here in Downing Street in February 1992. This is not something which has been rushed together in a question of the last few weeks. We have had this difficulty in Northern Ireland for the last 25 years. It is not proper, it is not moral to stand aside and regard this as something that is unimportant. If this slaughter had occurred over the last 25 years in counties on the mainland in England, I think people would have been pressing

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for very firm action indeed. I feel just as strongly about those murders and that mayhem in Northern Ireland, and it is because I feel strongly about that, and the Taoiseach feels strongly about that, that we came together in February of 1992 and decided we would explore every avenue to see if we could make some move forward. But it is a move, as we have both said, that must be funded on the principles that governments have set out in the past, and above all upon the inalienable and inviolable principle of consent among the people of Northern Ireland.

QUESTION:

... where is the dynamic within this document that will actually make a change to the talks process to enable it to have a successful conclusion?

TAOISEACH:

First of all, the forum for peace and reconciliation is predicated on a real cessation of violence, so if you have a real cessation of violence you set up the forum for peace and reconciliation.

QUESTION:

Inaudible.

TAOISEACH:

It will only happen if there is a cessation of violence, then all parties can join it and as I say try and work out between themselves their approaches to trying to solve the real political

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problems that are there and when the talks process gets going, as we inevitably believe it will, then all parties would be ready and have their homework done for the talks process and then the forum would cease and everybody would get into the talks process, when we are all satisfied that a real and permanent cessation of violence has taken place.

QUESTION (Jim Dougal):

Prime Minister, you have said that there could be exploratory talks between the British government and Sinn Fein three months after they renounce violence, could you tell me what those exploratory talks would be about?

PRIME MINISTER:

They would be about the mechanisms, ways and timescale in which Sinn Fein would then enter the talks proper. There is a great deal of mechanistic discussion as to how they would enter the talks and what the arrangements would be. We would establish those preliminary exploratory talks three months after a renunciation, permanently, of violence.

QUESTION:

Could I ask you both if you intend to use your channels of communication to find out what the chances are of a cessation of violence now that the document has been completed?

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TAOISEACH:

I have always said that I use the widest possible platforms for communication and indeed for input into the fears and suspicions of both communities and I have no doubt that the Prime Minister did likewise in his preparations. So that at the end of the day the result of our joint work would be a balanced approach in relation to our communities. We believe that the document sets out clearly where the governments want to see the communities of Northern Ireland go in the future based on consent and agreement, agreement to whatever is to take place, if there is to be change there has to be agreement to that change. So it is a matter indeed for the political leaders and the communities there to sit down around the table ultimately and work out that there is no future in violence, that violence is not going to attain the political objectives that people thought for many many years were going to be attained, they now have the opportunity, after a cessation of violence, to sit around the table and contribute to the future of the welfare of the people of the island as a whole.

PRIME MINISTER:

I think the men of violence may have heard of this declaration and this meeting and I think we await to see whether they will respond or not, but I think it is for them to tell us.

(END OF TRANSCRIPT)