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Papers**

**UCDA P254/99**

ConfidentialDeclaration of British Interest in eventual Irish Unity

1. The Government's desire for a British declaration of interest in eventual Irish unity was most recently given public expression in the Taoiseach's speech to the Fianna F3il Ard-Pheis on 16 February last:

"In my view, a declaration by the British Government of their interest in encouraging the unity of Ireland, by agreement and in peace, would open the way towards an entirely new situation in which peace, real lasting, peace would become an attainable reality".

2. Informal British reaction to this call by the Government has been to say that a declaration of the kind we seek would amount to a removal of the "constitutional guarantee". It would, British officials say, be a message to unionists that they would no longer have the support of the British Government which would, in fact, be signalling their acceptance of the nationalist aspiration. The British say they could not, on this analysis, make such a declaration. They consider that at the practical level its effects would be to provoke a strong, probably violent unionist backlash without any compensating reduction in I.R.A. violence. On the contrary I.R.A. violence, the British feel, might well increase also since the I.R.A. would interpret the British declaration as a sign of weakness and a signal of incipient withdrawal.

3. Our basic aim in asking the British Government to make the declaration of interest in Irish unity is presumably to encourage the unionist section and its leaders to recognise the realities of their political and economic position. The purpose of our seeking the British declaration would be to stimulate an evolution in unionist political thinking of which there are already some signs - that is an evolution towards a more open attitude to this State and towards recognition of our common interests in, for instance, the European context. The declaration is accordingly not conceived as

something which would of itself bring about an immediate and decisive result in constitutional/political terms. It would start and encourage unionist thought-processes leading towards reconciliation and agreement on all-Ireland structures, thought-processes which at present appear to be blocked by the British "constitutional guarantee" and by general anti-nationalist prejudice.

4. It seems appropriate to examine the possibility that the aim of giving a political stimulus to unionists could be achieved without specific withdrawal of the British constitutional undertaking. This would involve a declaration by the British of their interest in eventual Irish unity and of their desire to see all sections of the community in Northern Ireland reflecting upon the advantages to be derived from national reconciliation. The declaration would be completed or accompanied by an indication that the British would not meanwhile be withdrawing their undertaking not to change the constitutional position of the Six Counties until a majority desired change. The two parts of such a statement would be compatible. The net effect could be to produce the positive effects on unionist thinking which we want while avoiding the negative unionist reaction which the British fear.

5. A proposal for such a two-part declaration might have some chance of being accepted. A declaration along the lines suggested would represent a change in the British position, and a change which we would have brought about. On the basis of tentative discussion on a personal basis about a year ago with British officials, it would seem that the British might be seriously interested. However the British might ask us to make a counterpart declaration which they would presumably wish to commit us solemnly to safeguarding unionist interests and traditions and to working for a united Ireland on the basis of consent.