

Ireland (Joint Declaration)

30 pm

The Prime Minister (Mr. John Major): With permission, Madam Speaker, I should like to make a statement about my discussions with the Irish Prime Minister.

As the House will be aware, the Taoiseach and I agreed a joint declaration this morning. Copies of the declaration have been placed in the Vote Office. I know that the whole House will wish to hear what lay behind this declaration and what it may mean for the future.

For the past 25 years, the people of Northern Ireland have suffered levels of violence that any civilised community would find intolerable. No community, and especially no part of the United Kingdom, should have to endure the murder and destruction that have afflicted the Province. That is why successive British Governments have sought to find a solution to these terrible problems. We must care as much about violence in Northern Ireland as about violence in any other part of the Union.

When the Taoiseach and I met at Downing street two years ago, we both agreed on the need to work together to try to bring about peace in Northern Ireland and in the Republic. We were both well aware of the pitfalls and dangers which have wrecked so many previous attempts, but we both knew that, after 25 years of killing, we had to make it a personal priority both to seek a permanent end to violence and to establish the basis for a comprehensive and lasting political settlement.

The declaration that we have agreed today shows the commitment of the two Governments for peace and democracy and against violence. Its objective is to set a framework for peace, a framework that reflects our responsibilities to both communities in a way that is fully compatible with the undertakings that we have both given and with the objectives of the talks process.

Copies of the joint declaration have been placed in the Vote Office. I urge all hon. Members to read it carefully. It deserves careful study. It has required detailed and painstaking negotiations between the two Governments. It addresses the concerns of both sides of the Community and it is totally consistent with the principles that this Government have repeatedly confirmed to the House.

It may help the House if I set out the main elements of the declaration. I will, where possible, quote directly from the text of the declaration so that there can be no misunderstanding about what it says.

First, paragraph 2 expressly reaffirms the British Government's commitment to Northern Ireland's statutory constitutional guarantee. This guarantees that, as long as a majority of the people of Northern Ireland wish to remain a part of the United Kingdom, the Government will uphold their right to do so. That pledge is rock solid. That is set out most clearly also in paragraph 4, which reaffirms that the British Government will

"uphold the democratic wish of a greater number of the people of Northern Ireland on the issue of whether they prefer to support the Union or a sovereign united Ireland."

Later in that paragraph, the British Government agree

"that it is for the people of the island of Ireland alone, by agreement between the two parts respectively, to exercise their right of self-determination on the basis of consent, freely and concurrently given, North and South, to bring about a united Ireland, if that is their wish."

This is a crucial sentence, and one about which there has been much misleading speculation. So let me repeat that it says that a move to a united Ireland can take place only "by agreement between the two parts respectively"

and

"on the basis of consent, freely and concurrently given, North and South".

This fully protects the position of the majority in Northern Ireland, and means that change could come about only with their consent.

In line with previous undertakings, the British Government also reaffirm that if a future majority in Northern Ireland desired a united Ireland, we would introduce the necessary legislation to bring that about.

For his part, the Taoiseach accepts in paragraph 5 that "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."

Later in the same paragraph, he accepts that

"the democratic right of self-determination by the people of Ireland as a whole must be achieved and exercised with and subject to the agreement and consent of a majority of the people in Northern Ireland".

Those are important commitments by the Taoiseach which I know will be widely welcomed by the House. The House will also welcome, in paragraph 7, the Taoiseach's confirmation that in the event of an overall settlement of the talks process.

"the Irish Government will, as part of a balanced constitutional accommodation, put forward and support proposals for change in the Irish Constitution which would fully reflect the principle of consent in Northern Ireland."

The joint declaration fully backs the three-strand talks process involving the main constitutional parties and the two Governments. It says that it is the two Governments' aim

"to foster agreement and reconciliation, leading to a new political framework founded on consent and encompassing arrangements within Northern Ireland, for the whole island, and between these islands."

I believe that the passages that I have quoted, and the other language in the joint declaration, set out a clear framework under which differences can be negotiated and resolved exclusively by peaceful political means. But that can come about only if the men of violence end the killing and commit themselves to the democratic process. The joint declaration sets out the way in which this can be brought about.

Paragraph 10 says that both Governments

"reiterate that the achievement of peace must involve a permanent end to the use of, or support for, paramilitary violence. They confirm that, in these circumstances, democratically mandated parties which establish a commitment to exclusively peaceful methods and which have shown that they abide by the democratic process, are free to participate fully in democratic politics and to join in dialogue in due course between the Governments and the political parties on the way ahead."

Let me make it plain on behalf of the British Government what that undertaking means. If there is a permanent end to violence, and if Sinn Fein commits itself to the democratic process, then we will be ready to enter into preliminary exploratory dialogue with it within three months. But, first, it must end violence for good.

I understand the fears and concerns of Unionists about the prospects of the British Government's entering into talks with Sinn Fein. This period has been a worrying and uncertain time for them. Although they have the primary interest in seeing an end to violence, they are rightly concerned lest this be achieved by selling out the fundamental constitutional principles which the

Government have always upheld. If they fear that, then they should be reassured by this declaration. It reaffirms the constitutional guarantee in the clearest possible terms. The Taoiseach fully accepts the principle that any constitutional change could come about only with the consent of a majority in Northern Ireland.

In summary, let me make it clear what is in the declaration and what is not. What is in the declaration is a renewed commitment by the British Government to Northern Ireland's constitutional guarantee; an acknowledgement by the Taoiseach that a united Ireland could only be brought about with the consent of a majority of the people in Northern Ireland; a willingness on the Taoiseach's part to make changes in the Irish constitution if an overall settlement can be reached; and a confirmation that if Sinn Fein renounces violence, it will be able to participate in future democratic discussions.

What is not in the declaration is any suggestion that the British Government should join the ranks of persuaders of the "value" or "legitimacy" of a united Ireland; that is not there. Nor is there any suggestion that the future status of Northern Ireland should be decided by a single act of self-determination by the people of Ireland as a whole; that is not there either. Nor is there any timetable for constitutional change, or any arrangement for joint authority over Northern Ireland. In sum, the declaration provides that it is, as it must be, for the people of Northern Ireland to determine their own future.

All the constitutional parties in Northern Ireland will wish to study the document very carefully. I should like today to extend an offer to meet each of the parties regularly in the future, so that I can hear at first hand their concerns and ambitions, and can set out to them the British Government's position. If we can work together to quell ancient fears and suspicions, we can help to build a better future for Northern Ireland.

I have made it clear that if it renounces violence, the way is open to Sinn Fein to join in legitimate constitutional dialogue. That is a political route which it now has no excuse not to follow. That is the opportunity offered by this joint declaration—and it has been obtained without compromising any of the constitutional principles that this Government have consistently espoused. The onus is now on Sinn Fein to take advantage of that opportunity: I urge it to do so.

Mr. John Smith (Monklands, East): On behalf of the Opposition, I welcome the joint declaration with enthusiasm. We fervently hope that it will be an important first step in a peace process that will lead to a new political settlement. It was necessary for the two Governments to take the lead, but it is vital that the constitutional parties in Northern Ireland now take part in new discussions which the British Government should promote.

There was never any excuse for violence and terror on the part of any paramilitary organisation, but there is now an opportunity for both the permanent cessation of violence and the involvement of Sinn Fein in constitutional dialogue—provided that it is clear that the path of violence has been abandoned. We hope that the new opportunities that the declaration creates are seized by both traditions in Northern Ireland.

May I ask the Prime Minister two questions about the detail of the declaration? First, in paragraph 9, both Governments commit themselves to seeking to create institutions and structures which would enable the people

of Ireland to work together in all areas of common interest. What kind of institution, and what areas of policy, have the Governments in mind?

Secondly, the right hon. Gentleman referred to what he described as the "crucial sentence" in paragraph 4, about consent being

"freely and concurrently given, North and South".

Does that passage mean that a constitutional settlement arising from the talks process could be put to the people of Northern Ireland and those of the Republic in separate referendums on the same day?

Finally, may I endorse the appeal for an end to violence that the Prime Minister made in his concluding sentence? That must be the overwhelming desire of all the people of the British Isles—not least those in Northern Ireland—who have suffered the appalling violence of the past 25 years.

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman both for his support for the joint declaration and for the continuation of talks which necessarily must proceed beside it. I believe that he is right that it is an opportunity to move from a violent path. It is an opportunity which no one can compel the men of violence to take. It is an opportunity which lies there and it is in their hands now to decide whether to take that opportunity and move towards a legitimate political path in future. I repeat, I hope that they will take that opportunity.

As to the right hon. and learned Gentleman's two specific questions, the reference in paragraph 9 refers specifically to the three-stranded talks that are continuing at the present time, and there would be a large number of areas of common interest that are being identified in these talks that would be the subject of the structures referred to. So far as "freely and concurrently given" is concerned in terms of referendums, it certainly need not necessarily mean referendums on the same day. What it does mean is that that could be the situation. It is a matter for agreement in the talks and beyond, but they certainly need not necessarily be on the same day. It does imply that consent would need to be given separately north and south.

Mr. James Molyneux (Lagan Valley): Has the Prime Minister noticed that this morning's statement is already being termed the Downing street declaration? Those of us who remember the earlier Downing street declaration in the time of the Government of Lord Wilson will remember that it was very specific in saying that the affairs of Northern Ireland were an internal matter for the Parliament of the United Kingdom. May I, in a constructive fashion, ask the Prime Minister to assure us that the drift from that position over the past 20 years will be halted under his premiership?

Whatever the eventual conclusions that one may draw from this rather tortuously worded statement with its many contradictions—I am referring to the statement, not the one just made by the Prime Minister—it appears to give some finality to the secret discussions that have destabilised the Province over recent months and which the Prime Minister has recognised just now. Does the Prime Minister share my expectation that we can now proceed to govern Northern Ireland in accordance with the wishes of 85 per cent. of the population—Protestant and Roman Catholic—who were greatly reassured by his remark to the House that

"The future constitutional position of the people of Northern Ireland is a matter for the people of Northern Ireland to determine and for no one else to determine."—[*Official Report*, 18 November 1993; Vol. 233, c. 29.]

[1993. James Molyneaux]

Finally, can the Prime Minister confirm that the joint declaration does not assert the value or legitimacy of achieving a united Ireland without majority consent; commit the people of Northern Ireland to joining a united Ireland against their democratic wishes, establish any form of joint authority over Northern Ireland, even by phasing; establish any joint mechanisms such as a permanent convention; or give Sinn Fein an immediate place at the talks table? Can the Prime Minister also confirm that the statement does not sideline the very valuable round of meetings between the parties convened by the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland—the hon. Member for Devizes (Mr. Ancram)—which are now drawing towards a successful conclusion and which have been supported just now by the Leader of Her Majesty's Opposition?

The Prime Minister: On the right hon. Gentleman's specific point at the end, I can confirm to him that the joint declaration does not assert the value of achieving a united Ireland; does not assert the legitimacy of a united Ireland in the absence of majority consent; does not either, for I think that it was implicit in what the right hon. Gentleman said, commit the British Government to joining the ranks of the persuaders for a united Ireland. That is not the job of any British Government. It does not set any timetable for a united Ireland. It does not commit the people of Northern Ireland to join a united Ireland against their wishes, and it does not establish any arrangements for joint authority. I can confirm each of those points to the right hon. Gentleman.

As to the talks process undertaken by my hon. Friend the Member for Devizes, we anticipate and expect that they will continue and intensify. They are, I believe, becoming extremely valuable. We wish to proceed with them with all speed so that we can make further progress in the talks, which will run alongside the declaration that I have just set out to the House. As far as the consent principle is concerned, I reiterate again, because I wish no one to be in any doubt about this, that the future constitutional position of Northern Ireland lies now, and will continue to lie, within the wishes of the people of Northern Ireland. For so long as a majority of the people of Northern Ireland wish to remain within the Union, they will have the total and complete support of this Government in doing so.

Rev. Ian Paisley (Antrim, North): Would the Prime Minister care to comment on the fact that the great difficulty and the field of controversy between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic—Northern Ireland being a member of the United Kingdom, although the document never once mentions the United Kingdom; that phrase has ~~been entirely removed from the document—articles~~ articles 2 and 3 of the Irish constitution? Surely that is the very nub of the controversy. Why does this paper not even mention that?

A member of the Government said to me outside, "Oh, yes, but look at page 5." I have read the document carefully. In fact, I was able to receive from Dublin 24 hours before this document was available to other people all the information that I put in my letter—[*Interruption.*] It is very important that the Prime Minister should answer this question. He confirms that, in the event of an overall settlement, according to the Taoiseach,

"the Irish Government will, as part of a balanced constitutional accommodation, put forward and support proposals for change in the Irish Constitution which would fully reflect the principle of consent in Northern Ireland."

But it is not the principle of consent in Northern Ireland that has anything to do with articles 2 and 3; it is the principle of the territorial claim. However, that most important matter has not even been referred to.

Will the Prime Minister tell us what the statement on page 2 really does to the present position? Paragraph 4 states that the British Government agree:

"that it is for the people of the island of Ireland alone, by agreement between the two parts respectively, to exercise their right of self-determination on the basis of consent, freely and concurrently given, North and South, to bring about a united Ireland, if that is their wish."

How is that different? Is not it different from the present situation when the entity of self-determination in Northern Ireland is the people of Northern Ireland? Why must the people of Northern Ireland now be linked with the Irish Republic on a question of their own right to remain within this United Kingdom?

Finally, may I say to the Prime Minister, that, as a public representative, I find it very offensive to be told that, in three months' time, if the IRA ceases its violence without any conditions for handing over its weapons or its bomb-making material or any of its military prowess, the IRA will be invited, as constitutional politicians, to sit down at the table. That goes to the very gut of the resentment of the people of Northern Ireland who have been slaughtered, butchered and murdered—[*Interruption.*] I do not mind what the hon. Gentleman says. His constituents have not been murdered or butchered. Perhaps he would like to sit down with the godfathers of the IRA and others who have done such things. What I have described goes to the gut of the people of Northern Ireland. They look on this as a sell-out act of treachery.

The Prime Minister: Let me touch on the last part first. The hon. Gentleman makes the point that some of his constituents have been murdered by terrorist activities over the past 25 years. I acknowledge that and I understand the misery that that must have caused to his constituents, their families and to the hon. Gentleman himself.

I must say to the hon. Gentleman that the purpose of the agreement and the document is to make sure that, 25 years from now, his successor does not sit there saying that to the Prime Minister of the day. I wish to take action to make sure that there is no more bloodshed of that sort and no more coffins carried away week after week because politicians do not have the courage to sit down, address the problem and find a way through. I am prepared to do that. If the hon. Gentleman believes that I should not, he does not understand the responsibilities of the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom.

On the hon. Gentleman's three questions, the declaration does not specifically refer to the United Kingdom; it specifically refers to the Union, which I think that the hon. Gentleman himself cares about. If he reads the document carefully, which, alas, he had not done when he made his remarks this morning and issued his letter, he will see that reference to the Union. As for articles 2 and 3, the quotation answers the hon. Gentleman's own question. That is clearly intended to refer to articles 2 and 3 in due course, and does so refer.

On the hon. Gentleman's third point on paragraph 4 about freely expressed consent, the specific point of

is to mention the freely expressed consent north and south respectively. It is saying to the hon. Gentleman that he, his constituents and all the other people in Northern Ireland have themselves, by their own actions, in their hands the future constitutional position of Ulster.

Mr. John Hume (Foyle): May I express to the Prime Minister and to Mr. Reynolds my deep appreciation for the enormous amount of energy that they have put into trying to grasp the hope of peace—a hope which is shared by the masses of people on both islands? Having read the joint declaration, I think that it is one of the most comprehensive declarations that has been made about British-Irish relations in the past 70 years. My appeal to all sections of our people is to read the entire statement in full and to have no knee-jerk reactions but to study it carefully and in full before responding.

As the House will be aware, it has been the consistent position of my party that the British-Irish quarrel of old, the quarrel of sovereignty, has changed fundamentally in the evolution of the new interdependent and post-nationalist Europe of which we are members, but the legacy of that past is the deeply divided people. I welcome the fact that the declaration identifies the problem as the deeply divided people of Ireland. I also welcome the fact that it recognises that that division can be healed only by agreement, and by an agreement that earns the allegiance and agreement of all our traditions and respects their diversity. I welcome also the fact that the Government have committed themselves to promoting such agreement and to encouraging such agreement, and whatever form that agreement takes, the Government will endorse.

Does the Prime Minister agree that the joint declaration is a challenge to all parties to come to the table in a totally peaceful atmosphere to begin the very difficult process—it will be a difficult process—of reaching agreement? If it takes place in a peaceful atmosphere, we will have much more chance of reaching such an agreement. My appeal to everyone who comes to that table is to come armed only with the strength of their convictions and not with any form of coercion or physical force.

Let us remember at this time that it is people who have rights, not territory, and that humanity transcends nationality. May the House share with me at this moment the hope of all our people that today will be the first major step on a road that will remove for ever the gun and the bomb from our small island of people.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his comprehensive support. He is right; the declaration is a challenge to all parties and to all people concerned with finding a peaceful settlement in Northern Ireland. I have to say to all parties that I think that we have no moral alternative but to take up that challenge and see whether we can find a satisfactory outcome. The hon. Gentleman has shown his personal commitment to a settlement in Northern Ireland for many years and, on that basis, his support today is doubly welcome.

Mr. Tom King (Bridgwater): May I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the genuine and serious work that he has done in producing the declaration for the House? Is not it evident that no such declaration could give everybody

everything that they wanted? Is not it evident also that there is nothing in the declaration that genuinely and seriously threatens anybody's vital interests in the matter?

Is not there a heavy responsibility on all hon. Members, including the elected Members in Northern Ireland, not to react in a way which could destroy the best opportunity for peace that we have seen since the trouble began? Is not the message from the House—we hope that it will be repeated later from the Dail Eireann—to those who have been responsible for violence that, because there is now a joint offer from both Governments of access to the democratic process, violence should cease immediately?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his remarks. He speaks, of course, with the experience of having been a distinguished Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. He is right that this is a balanced document which now offers opportunities that were not there before. I share my right hon. Friend's hope that those opportunities will be taken up.

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): Will the Prime Minister note that he has our sincere and heartfelt good will in all his efforts and in the personal commitment which he is devoting to the task? Does he note also that we welcome the concurrent referendum possibility and the emphasis on human rights in the Taoiseach's own statement?

Is not the real question for the terrorists? Why should anybody else die and why should any more families be torn apart when it is possible to seek change without obstacle by a peaceful process, and when there are guarantees, which are underwritten by both Governments, that those changes cannot be enforced against the will of the majority in the north of Ireland?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. There is now no justification whatever for terrorism. There is now a clear and identifiable alternative for those people who seriously wish to engage in discussions in Northern Ireland. If terrorism were to continue after the statement and after the declaration, with the support that that has been given, it will be clearly understood by everyone that those people who engage in terrorism do not in any way genuinely seek a settlement, but simply wish to inflict murder and terror continuously.

Mr. Peter Temple-Morris (Leominster): May I ask my right hon. Friend to be encouraged by the fact that the British-Irish inter-parliamentary body met in London today, and British and Irish Members of Parliament alike asked me on their behalf to welcome the joint declaration and to give it their support?

May I further ask my right hon. Friend to repeat that the declaration is a framework for peace that represents in many ways an opportunity for a new beginning? Will my right hon. Friend, together with the Irish Taoiseach, continue with all of his strength in his historic work, the end of which can mean only the peace which we all want?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that. The declaration certainly is a framework for peace. It is an opportunity, but whether that opportunity is taken does not lie in my hands or in the hands of the Irish Prime Minister. It lies in the hands of the people who have bombed and killed for so long. It is they who must come under pressure to make sure that the violence ends.