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**Statement by Dick Spring TD
Tánaiste, Minister for Foreign Affairs
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In 1865, at the height of the American Civil War, Abraham Lincoln said "with malice towards none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in: to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and his orphan to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves."

The declaration agreed today by the British and Irish Governments can be the first step towards binding up the nation's wounds, and the first step towards a just and lasting peace. Since I began by quoting President Abraham Lincoln, it is perhaps fitting that I should continue by referring to a statement issued within the last hour by President Clinton in which he said:

"In this season of hope, the call for peace on earth has a special resonance in Northern Ireland. No side which claims a legitimate stake in the future of Northern Ireland can justify continued violence on any grounds. I call on those who would still seek to embrace or justify violence to heed the words of Paul and cast off the works of darkness and put on the armour of light."

What has happened today has a simple, yet profound significance. The British Government has declared, in a way that puts it beyond all doubt, that they are not the enemy of Irish national aspirations. The Irish Government has declared that we are not the enemy of Unionist rights and aspirations.

Those two simple statements can mean one thing and one thing only. Whatever justification may have been claimed for an armed struggle which had as its goal to drive Britain out of Ireland no longer exists.

The problem is not a problem between Britain and Ireland. The problem concerns relationships on this island. Those relationships have been founded for too many years on hatred and mistrust, on fear and terror. In making the declaration that was made today, the British Government affirmed that it is for us on this island, and us alone, to determine our own future on a basis of new relationships built on consent and trust.

No British Government has ever made such a declaration, in such a formal way, so succinctly and expressly as that. I found myself in an unusual position today in Downing Street, as the only politician present who had also been in Hillsborough in 1985 when the Anglo-Irish Agreement was signed. That agreement, too, held out the opportunity of self-determination based on consent to the people of this island. But even that was not as clearly expressed in words that are immediately understandable to everybody.

I don't believe that there can be any room for misunderstanding what has been said today. But I want to make it clear, for my own part, and I think on the part of everyone in this House, that we do not want a future on this island based on mistrust or on fear. We do not want the false unity that comes from coercion.

In making this declaration, we have adopted the role of persuaders. When I say we, I mean we the Irish Government and we the people of the Republic of Ireland. Irish unity will only be achieved, in the words of the declaration, "only by those who favour this outcome persuading those who do not, peacefully and without coercion or violence". In short, the search for Irish unity must become for all of us a search for unity of hearts and minds, for unity of purpose, and not merely a search for unity of territory.

I have spent many weeks, in common with several of my colleagues, seeking out opportunities to speak, frankly and openly, with people who disagree with the aspiration for unity. That process, which has been conducted in an atmosphere of confidentiality in order to protect them, has led me inexorably to the conclusion that nothing could be more worthwhile than the effort to build new relationships and to build confidence.

Again and again, I have sought to assure the people to whom I have spoken that they have nothing to fear from the attitude which the Irish Government was bringing to these negotiations. Again and again, they have told me that fear is inbuilt in the community of Northern Ireland, that the divisions between the two traditions in that community have sometimes made hatred palpable. Again and again, they have told me that the single request I have made to them - that they should learn to trust the good faith of the Irish Government in regard to their tradition - is the hardest thing I could ask.

I hope that as they read and study this declaration, they will come to realise that in all the meetings they had with me, they were told nothing less than the truth. I hope that it will now be possible to begin the long, slow, and painstaking process of ending this conflict between traditions on our island.

The first prerequisite is the removal of violence. When I spoke in this House on October 27th last on this subject, I pointed out that many of the activists of the provisional IRA have been involved in violence and terror for all of their adult lives. Many of them now have teenage children. They have a choice - they can condemn their children, and their children's children, to lives of violence and terror. Or they can stop.

If they were to stop now, it would provide hope that politics can replace terror as a means of achieving political objectives. It would free their children from the shadow of the gunman, and empower them for the first time in their lives to contribute to the wellbeing of their own communities.

Now, they have that chance. The peace process in which they have claimed an involvement, and which has been pursued so diligently and courageously by John Hume, Seamus Mallon, and others, has given them that choice. It has shown the way to an end to killing, and to the beginnings, at last, of the road to addressing the relationships on this island in the way that they need to be addressed.

In the speech I referred to a moment ago, I set out six democratic principles which must underpin the search for peace and progress.