

PA Forum file



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RESPONSE TO REPORT OF NEW IRELAND FORUM

The following statement is issued today on behalf of HMG by the Rt Hon James Prior MP, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, in response to the publication of the report of the New Ireland Forum:

"The problems faced by our fellow citizens in Northern Ireland are grave. That much at least is common ground. The continuing problems of the Province demand that we give attention to all responsible views. The Government will study the Forum Report carefully and also reactions to it, not least in Northern Ireland itself.

The authors of the Report (all the main parties in the Republic and one party from Northern Ireland) cannot expect the Government to accept the Nationalist interpretation of past events which the Report expresses, or the dismissal of the strenuous efforts which successive United Kingdom governments have made in the past 15 years to deal with the intractable problems of Northern Ireland. The Forum's account of the British position is one-sided and unacceptable.

Nevertheless, the Government welcomes important positive elements in the Report. First, there is a clear and unambiguous reaffirmation of the commitment of the Forum participants to the politics of peaceful persuasion, and unqualified opposition to violence and those who support violence. The Report also confirms the established position of successive Irish governments that unity is sought on a basis "freely negotiated and agreed to by the people of the North and by the people of the South." In seeking such agreement, the Report includes a considered attempt by Nationalists to recognise and respect the

distinctive identity of Northern Ireland Unionists, including their loyalty to the United Kingdom.

The Government stands by its undertaking that Northern Ireland shall not cease to be part of the United Kingdom without the consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland and remains willing to give effect to any majority wish which might be expressed in favour of unity. But Unionist opposition to Irish unity is to the principle rather than the form. As the Report acknowledges, consent has to be freely given. And there is no reason to expect such consent to a change in sovereignty in Northern Ireland in any of the three forms suggested in the Report.

It remains necessary to face the problems of division and violence in Northern Ireland, including the feelings of alienation among the Nationalist minority. The Government's continuing objective is to provide a basis on which all its inhabitants - Unionist and Nationalist - can live securely, peacefully and prosperously in the years immediately ahead, giving full expression to their identities and aspirations and playing their proper part in public affairs. The Government is ready to consider with all those who renounce violence ways in which this objective can be achieved.

The United Kingdom government welcomes the statement in the Report that the parties in the Forum remain fully open to discuss other views."