

The Making of the Downing Street Declaration

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The Downing Street Declaration – or ‘Joint Declaration for Peace’, as the Irish preferred to call it – was announced by John Major and Albert Reynolds on 15 December 1993. It was one of the most important Irish constitutional documents produced during the twentieth century. The declaration established the mechanism – simultaneous referenda North and South – by which Ireland may one day be peacefully united. It was a remarkable achievement. The two governments were consequently able to park the ‘constitutional’ issue – the future of the Irish border – creating space for detailed negotiations on political institutions and security matters and eventually bringing to an end the political violence which had disfigured Northern Ireland for a quarter of a century.¹

The Joint Declaration grasped the thorniest issues at the heart of the Northern Ireland conflict: self-determination and consent. These two principles encapsulated the clash of political visions in Northern Ireland in its most intractable form. Self-determination was regarded as ‘Provo-speak’.² To most ears, this arcane phrase was merely a sophisticated way of saying ‘united Ireland’ or ‘Brits out’. But technically the idea conferred legitimacy on any political structures for the island of Ireland approved by a majority of its inhabitants, *voting in a single unit*. There had not been an all-Ireland vote of this or any kind since the landslide victory of Sinn Féin in the general election of 1918. The consent principle, on the other hand, was shorthand for the pledge given by successive British governments to Ulster Unionists that Northern Ireland would not cease to be part of the United Kingdom without the agreement of a majority of its citizens. The *Writing Peace* project reveals fully, for the first time, how these diametrically opposed positions were seemingly reconciled.

The story of the declaration involves extraordinary risks and delicate political judgements. The documents made available by Quill demonstrate the imaginative effort and determination of intermediaries, civil servants and politicians who dared to believe that a resolution to the long war in the North might just be within reach. This introduction traces the evolution of the Joint Declaration from the initial overtures made by the Redemptorist priest Fr Alec Reid to Charles Haughey in 1986, through the Hume-Adams talks, to the tense negotiations between UK and Irish officials in December 1993. It draws on interviews with the principal architects of the declaration (John Chilcot, Quentin Thomas, Martin Mansergh, Séan Ó hUiginn), conducted over several years. It also draws on a series of archives which have now become available for the first time. These include the position papers of the peacemaker Father Reid, contained in the Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich Archive³ in Armagh, and the Dermot Nally⁴ papers in University College Dublin.

Writing Peace sheds new light on the twists and turns of the early peace process. The project, when complete, will include letters to the Provisional Army Council showing that as far back

¹ The fullest account is Eamon O’Kane, *The Northern Ireland Peace Process: From Armed Conflict to Brexit* (Manchester, 2021).

² Eamonn Mallie and David McKittrick, *The Fight for Peace: The Inside Story of the Irish Peace Process* (London, 1997 edn.), p. 84.

³ Writing Peace: Tomás Ó Fiaich Collection, https://www.quillproject.net/m2/resource_collections/352/.

⁴ Writing Peace: Dermot Nally Collection, https://www.quillproject.net/m2/resource_collections/341/

as April 1987 the IRA leadership was considering dramatically modifying its public position on partition. It shows how the British and Irish delegations approached the bilateral summit at Dublin Castle on 3 December 1993⁵ when the initiative almost collapsed. Above all, it highlights the ingenuity and subtlety of Séan Ó hUiginn, Quentin Thomas and other officials who painstakingly hammered together an ideological formula that proved tolerable to all sides⁶. The fraught issues that confronted them went back to the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921. Was there one people of Ireland or two? Were the Ulster Unionists Irish, British, or a mixture of the two? Would the North and the South determine their future ‘collectively’, ‘concurrently’ or ‘separately’?

Reconstructing the genealogy of the Joint Declaration is diabolically tricky. Its origins lie in a series of overlapping initiatives with Gerry Adams at the centre but by no means in control of them. It was Adams who imported the term ‘peace process’ from Israel-Palestine around 1990.⁷ In retrospect it is intriguing that the very first publication that appeared under his name, a pamphlet written in 1976 while he was interned in Long Kesh, was entitled *Peace in Ireland*. This was a restatement of republican orthodoxy: the root cause of violence in Ireland was British imperialism; the only remedy was an all-Ireland republic with structures of government decided by the Irish people themselves and ‘based on socialist principles’.⁸ Adams’s analysis of Unionism was confined to a brief denunciation of ‘the fascist mentality of Orangeism’. Loyalism was diagnosed as the instrument of the classic imperialist strategy of governing a colony through a privileged minority. Ordinary Protestants, Adams confidently predicted, would ‘face up to the reality of the situation when the British prop and the system which uses them as its tools is removed’.⁹

By the early 1980s the circle around Adams – younger, articulate figures such as Danny Morrison and Tom Hartley – were borrowing Trotskyist arguments from the New Left (the People’s Democracy, the British and Irish Communist Organisation, Militant Tendency) in an attempt to associate the republican war with socio-economic grievances and to cultivate the leftist fringe of the British Labour Party.¹⁰ In the prisons a culture of ideological experimentation began to flourish in the aftermath of the 1981 hunger strikes. The election victories of Bobby Sands and Kieran Doherty were exhilarating. Republicans felt connected to wider national and international opinion for the first time since the Civil Rights protests and Internment. For IRA volunteers on the outside, there were ‘no away days [or] think-ins’ ... you were evading the law and living hand to mouth’. Prisons, in both parts of Ireland, served

⁵ Ian McBride et al, *Northern Ireland Downing Street Joint Declaration (1993)*, Quill Project at Pembroke College (Oxford, 2023), [Session 21138](#).

⁶ McBride et al, *Northern Ireland Downing Street Joint Declaration*, [Informal British-Irish Bilaterals](#).

⁷ See for example his letter to John Major, 20 August 1991, reprinted in Coakley and Todd, *Negotiating a Settlement*, p. 298.

⁸ Gerry Adams, *Peace in Ireland: A Broad Analysis of the Present Situation* ([Belfast, 1976]), p. 2.

⁹ Adams, *Peace in Ireland*, pp. 6, 8.

¹⁰ Marc Mulholland, Northern Ireland and the Far Left, c. 1965–1975, *Contemporary British History*, 32.4 (2018), pp. 542-563.

as a ‘think-tank’ for the wider movement.¹¹ But there were limits to these deviations from republican orthodoxy. Initially forays into electoral politics could be justified as a ‘destructive mechanism’ – a tactical method of widening grassroots support but with the familiar aim of disrupting British moves to stabilise the region. The circulation of socialist language, although pervasive during the 1980s, operated within ‘an enduring master frame that primarily opposed the British presence, rather than international capitalism per se’.¹² In the aftermath of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, however, the rhetoric of class war was softened as the Sinn Féin *ard fheis* endorsed the leadership’s objective of building an ‘all-Ireland mass movement’ based on the central demand for ‘national self-determination’¹³

The IRA itself seemed as implacable and as contemptuous of broader public opinion as ever. By the beginning of the 1990s the movement had become dangerously disconnected from mainstream nationalist opinion on the island. A suppressed article written by Danny Morrison, now serving a prison sentence, accepted the hard reality that ‘the purely military struggle was being isolated and marginalised and could not win on its own’.¹⁴ Despite infiltration by British agents and informers, the IRA remained formidable. It was capable of veering suddenly and spectacularly into new arenas, as demonstrated by the devastating attacks on RUC stations mounted by the East Tyrone brigade in the late 1980s or the City of London bombing campaign of the early 1990s. In the ‘areas’ – the working-class Catholic enclaves – the Republican Movement had long exercised some of the functions of a shadowy state within the state. In one of the best books written about the conflict, Niall Ó Dochartaigh points out that ‘the organisation had a huge stockpile of weaponry, a powerful community presence – including a “civil administration” that exercised policing functions – widespread popular support, and a sufficiently steady flow of recruits and resources to sustain the campaign’.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the long war strategy as Adams conceived of it – low-level pressure applied by surgical strikes in tandem with deepening politicisation, could not be sustained indefinitely. Every attempt to escalate the war risked civilian casualties.

It was the killing of a UDR sergeant, Tommy Cochrane, in 1982 that prompted Father Alec Reid’s re-engagement with peace work. By the later 1980s there were several backchannel contacts running in parallel, sometimes overlapping and sometimes in competition. Singling out their distinctive contributions is difficult. In the early days John Hume resented the way that Father Reid selectively reworked his words into peace proposals. He handed one of Reid’s manifestos to a NIO official at Aldergrove airport, expressing his distaste for ‘all this’, and adding that the Redemptorist was ‘so close to the Republicans that he interpreted everything

¹¹ Conor Murphy quoted in Hepworth, *The Age-Old Struggle*, p. 70. Jack Hepworth, “‘Progress will not occur if we continually adopt positions of principle’: Irish Republican Prisoners and Strategic Reorientation, c. 1976–1998”, *Irish Political Studies*, 38.2 (2023), pp. 161-188. For a jaundiced view see Rogelio Alonso, *The IRA and Armed Struggle* (London, 2007), ch. 5.

¹² Jack Hepworth, *The Age-Old Struggle: Irish Republicanism from the Battle of the Bogside to the Belfast Agreement, 1969-1998* (Liverpool, 2021), p. 93.

¹³ *Iris Bheag*, Jan 1989, quoted in Hepworth, ‘Irish Republican Prisoners and Strategic Reorientation’, p. 172. more generally see Frampton, *Long March*, ch. 2.

¹⁴ Danny Morrison, *Then the Walls Came Down: A Prison Journal* (Cork, 1997), pp. 289-90.

¹⁵ Ó Dochartaigh, *Deniable Contact*, p. 190.

with their point of view in mind'.¹⁶ Although Hume nevertheless went on to write the original version of the Joint Declaration he rapidly lost control of it. Dublin had authorised its own intermediaries to meet independently with republican leaders; Martin Mansergh was mulling over papers received from Father Reid, and he proceeded to exchange ideas directly with Adams and later McGuinness. Confusingly, iterations of the Joint Declaration were communicated to the British government by Hume as well as by Dublin: as Robin Butler recollected, Hume 'was always coming up and getting bits of paper out of his pockets and giving them to us'.¹⁷ 'JD 6' – the version rather sensationally handed by Albert Reynolds to Robin Butler in a sealed envelope at Baldonnell air base on 6 June 1993, apparently with the backing of the Provisional Army Council – is sometimes described as 'Hume-Adams'; but the Taoiseach reported that 'several exchanges' had taken place without Hume's involvement.¹⁸ Then, in the summer of 1993 a 'multi-layered process of collective drafting' was embarked on, involving Dermot Nally and Seán Ó hUiginn on the Irish side, and John Chilcot and Quentin Thomas on the British.¹⁹ Nally later commented that he had never been involved in any negotiation 'where there were so many people with their fingers in the pie'.²⁰

Reid-Adams

The vital figure in building bridges between the Provisionals and the outside world was the Redemptorist, Father Alec Reid. From 1986 he had been arguing that a declaration by the British government recognising the Irish right to self-determination would enable Gerry Adams to make the case within the Republican Movement for a ceasefire. The role of Father Reid was first revealed in two important accounts by experienced journalists, Eamonn Mallie and David McKittrick's *The Fight for Peace* (1996) and Ed Moloney's *A Secret History of the IRA* (2002), but the scale and remarkable tenacity of his peace work have never been fully appreciated. His efforts to connect republicans with mainstream nationalism dated back to the 1970s, when Gerry Fitt complained to the Northern Ireland Office about Father Reid 'pestering him'.²¹ Something resembling the Hume-Adams project took shape in Reid's mind before either Hume or Adams became leaders of their respective parties. From Clonard Monastery in West Belfast Reid despatched his long letters, methodically proceeding from one point to the next. Right from the beginning he believed that the principle of self-determination was the natural basis for a pan-nationalist alliance. Two of his manifestos, addressed to John Hume and Charles Haughey, have now appeared in print. A third was sent to the Northern Ireland Secretary Tom

¹⁶ [I. M. Burns, 6 December 1989, 'Father Alec Reid and Raymond Murray: Proposed Resolution of NI Problem, 1989-1990', TNA, CJ4/9243.](#)

¹⁷ John Coakley and Jennifer Todd, *Negotiating a Settlement in Northern Ireland, 1969-2019* (Oxford, 2020), p. 233. John Major recalls Hume and Reynolds 'ferrying parallel, and often conflicting, messages to us': *John Major: The Autobiography* (London, 1999), p. 441.

¹⁸ [Robin Butler to Roderic Lyne, 6 June 1993, TNA, CJ4/10560/55.](#) In fact, Hume disliked this version and submitted another of his own composition (JD7) on 9 July 1993.

¹⁹ 'Foundations and Principles of a Peace Process: An Interview with Seán Ó hUiginn', Graham Spencer, *Inside Accounts, Volume I: The Irish Government and Peace in Northern Ireland, from Sunningdale to the Good Friday Agreement* (Manchester, 2020), p. 128.

²⁰ Coakley and Todd, *Negotiating a Settlement*, p. 231.

²¹ The context was the prison protests. See D. R. Ford, 'Note for Record', 17 May 1978, TNA.

King on 6 September 1987.²² But he had also sent his proposals directly to the Provisional Army Council as early as the Spring of 1987, in two letters signed ‘Alasdair O’Riada’ and addressed *a chairde dílse*: ‘my faithful friends’.

The Irish civil servant and diplomat Seán Ó hUiginn has described Reid as not so much a ‘theoretician’ as ‘guarantor’ within the Republican movement. His primary value was that he could be relied upon to provide a truthful account of republican attitudes as he saw them.²³ But he was also trying to achieve a reformulation of republican orthodoxy, at first in dialogue with Gerry Adams and with the Army Council of the IRA, and then with representatives of the two governments. He was a prolific generator of texts. Between 1986 and 1990 he constantly reworked phrases and formulae from Sinn Féin pronouncements, from the New Ireland Forum and John Hume, and from the Northern Ireland Office. It is fair to say that his methodology was a scissors-and-paste approach rather than an attempt to think through the issues at a systematic level. That is not to deny that Reid possessed core political beliefs, but they were based on broad theological generalisations and pastoral intuitions.

Reid rejected armed struggle for both moral and political reasons. He once pronounced that it was wrong for nationalists ‘even to throw a stone’ in the name of Irish freedom.²⁴ When addressing the Provisional Army Council he appealed to the inclusive rhetoric of Wolfe Tone and to the example of Patrick Pearse in deciding to lay down arms in Easter Week rather than cause further bloodshed. But Reid was disturbed by the tendency of the Catholic Church, particularly under the primacy of Cahal Daly, to condemn IRA attacks while remaining silent about the brutality of the British Army. In November 1989 he collaborated with Fr Raymond Murray, a chaplain at Armagh prison for 19 years and a well-known critic of human rights abuses committed by the British Army.²⁵ Interestingly, there is nothing in his position papers about the colonial analysis of Britain’s role in Ireland propounded by the Republican Movement. It seems that Reid simply took it as read that the conflict was about Ireland and that a democratic solution would have to involve the inhabitants of the thirty-two counties. He thought of democracy as rooted in the ‘God-given’ dignity of every human being.²⁶ Peacemaking in Ireland therefore required dialogue with all groups, and for Reid that meant, most obviously, with the Provisionals.

In 1987 Reid composed a twelve-page paper entitled ‘A Concrete Proposal for an Overall Political Strategy to Establish Justice and Peace in Ireland’.²⁷ It set out five fundamental principles, beginning predictably with ‘the right of the Irish people as a whole to determine

²² Reid’s letters to Hume (19 May 1986) and Haughey (11 May 1987), can be found in Martin McKeever, *One Man, One God: The Peace Ministry of Fr Alec Reid C.Ss.R.* (Dublin, 2017), pp. 112-29, and Moloney, *Secret History*, appendix 7 (pp. 615-30). His letter to King is available in [TNA, CJ4/8792](#).

²³ Interview with Seán Ó hUiginn, 17 February 2021.

²⁴ The Conflict in Northern Ireland (1989), OFCA 7/4/034. an edited version later *CSsR Communicationes* (no.67) p. 6. Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich Library and Archive (ÓLA), Armagh.

²⁵ [See the file TNA, CJ4/9243, ‘Father Alec Reid and Raymond Murray: Proposed Resolution of NI Problem, 1989-1990’.](#)

²⁶ Reid, ‘The Conflict in Northern Ireland’, dated 2 February 1989, p. 9, OFCA/7/4/034.

²⁷ A version was reproduced in Moloney, *Secret History*, appendix 8 (pp. 633-34). The version used here is OFCA 7/4/046, an untitled draft of a letter sent (or at least intended to be sent) to the Army Council of the IRA.

their own constitutional and political freely ... without any interference or dictation by the British authorities'. This gesture towards Sinn Féin was quickly followed by a novel attempt to address the unit problem, or rather to circumvent it, under the heading of 'the principle of self-definition'. Reid began by remarking that 'the facts of geography' established that 'the Irish people as a whole' could only mean the inhabitants of all 32 counties of Ireland. But, on the other hand, 'the facts of history, politics, religion and culture' defined the Irish people as comprising two traditions, nationalist and unionist. In this and later documents the Redemptorist made repeated references to interlocking 'historical, political, religious and cultural realities' – a formula he had borrowed from a secret NIO communication of 1987. Reid referred to this letter as 'the document'. It was probably written by a civil servant named Ian Burns, and perhaps, in turn, inspired by conversations with John Hume.²⁸ (Unpicking this exercise in intertextuality is now impossible.) In effect Father Reid was according Ulster Protestants the status of a distinct sub-national group, the equivalent of what political and social scientists might term an ethnic minority. This allowed the priest, turning to his third principle, 'of consent', to recast self-determination as what he called 'twofold consent' – a process in which political structures would have to be agreed between the two traditions 'who live in Ireland taken as a whole'. Once again, he was drawing on 'the document', which asserted that questions of self-determination could only be resolved by dialogue between 'the peoples of both traditions'.²⁹

From there Father Reid returned to safer ground. He foresaw the election of an Irish constitutional conference or convention which would remain in being until political arrangements for a united, independent state were devised. This convention would be open to submissions from the churches, trade unions and women's organisations. The British, however, would absent themselves from the dialogue while committing their resources to facilitating its decisions. This noble gesture was how Reid reimagined 'The Principle of British Withdrawal'. In republican thought the idea of a national convention usually resembled a constituent body of the kind made famous by the American and French revolutions. This is what Adams had in mind in March 1987, when he told the Oxford Union that the republican goal was an 'all-Ireland constitutional conference' that would draw up a new constitutional framework.³⁰ In private, Reid acknowledged that such a convention would undoubtedly be boycotted by Unionists. But the real point, as he explained to his contacts at the Northern Ireland Office, was to provide a forum in which Adams, Hartley and the other Sinn Féin leaders would be given an 'opportunity to make some sort of move without losing credibility'.³¹

In the late 1980s Reid wrote dozens of papers rehearsing similar propositions. Many of his position papers and articles were forwarded to Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich, who gave his peace

²⁸ Unusually among NIO officials, Ian Burns did not maintain contact with other former civil servants, and he has never been interviewed or involved in witness seminars. Moloney prints the Burns letter, which he calls the 'philosophical fountainhead' of the peace process on pp. 252-54 and, so far as I know, he is the only person who has ever seen a copy.

²⁹ Moloney, *Secret History*, p. 252.

³⁰ Moloney, *Secret History*, p. 257.

³¹ [J. E. McConnell, 'Further Discussion with Father Reid', 30 Nov. 1989, TNA, CJ4/8792.](#)

work a notably guarded endorsement.³² Some were clearly products of the SDLP-Sinn Féin talks of 1988; Reid seems to have supplied agendas for discussion and summaries of common ground. One of the longest was a 21-page commentary on the Sinn Féin document ‘Towards a Strategy for Peace’ and was largely concerned with the task of reconciling consent with national self-determination – or what republicans sometimes called ‘N.S.D.’³³ Nowhere in Reid’s papers is there an explanation of how ‘twofold consent’ or ‘co-determination’ might in practice be obtained. What seems reasonably clear, however, is that his vision was a very long way from any of the options considered seriously by constitutional politicians.

Reid was not, as already noted, a political thinker. Nor, despite the titles chosen for several of his papers, was he a political strategist. He was a priest and a peace-maker, who believed in the church ministry’s tradition of providing a *tearmann* or place of sanctuary. Like all serious peace-makers Reid was a professional optimist. In 1986 he encouraged Charles Haughey to believe that an IRA ceasefire could be accomplished within months; the next year he informed the Provisional Army Council that the British state had accepted Irish self-determination both in theory and in practice. Both statements are highly questionable. Evaluating the reliability of his judgements is not a straightforward task. At the NIO Ian Burns warned his Secretary of State about Reid’s ‘considerable capacity to talk up what he has been told by others’ advising that he would take anything other than an ‘unequivocal ‘no’ as ‘maybe’.³⁴ What can the Provisional Army Council have made of Reid’s predictions about the ‘Lebanese type of situation’ that would follow a British withdrawal, referring repeatedly to the ‘expert advice’ he had received from the NIO, to a loyalist he had encountered at a meeting on the Shankill and the recollections of an American marine who had served in Vietnam?³⁵

In some of the essentials, however, Reid’s tireless correspondence demonstrated a shrewd grasp of political realities. In a letter to the Provisional Army Council he directly addressed himself to the republican assumption that Unionists were ‘hard-headed and pragmatic folk ..., who, if they saw that the British were pulling out of Ireland, would soon be down at the bargaining table on the side where their bread would be buttered’. While he did not completely dismiss this cliché, Reid suggested it was equally true that Ulster Protestants were ‘a tough, intelligent and determined people who would fight to the bitter end and lay down their lives for what they would see as the God-given rights of their religious and loyalist heritage.’³⁶ Also acute, as it turned out, was Father Reid’s assessment of Gerry Adams, contained in a long letter to Tom King, then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland:

I believe that, as a politician, he belongs to the highest rank or, at least, that he has the qualities to reach the highest rank. He has, in my opinion, the political shrewdness and decisiveness, the thoroughness in work, the ability to analyse the dynamics of a political situation, the judgement in calculating risks and the courage in taking them, the

³² [Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich to John \[Hume\], 10 November 1989, TNA, CJ4/9243, ‘Father Alec Reid and Raymond Murray: Proposed Resolution of NI Problem, 1989-1990’.](#)

³³ ‘The Question of Political Self-Determination’, OCFA, 7/4/058.

³⁴ Ian Burns to ‘PS/Secretary of State’, 1 March 1990

³⁵ Reid to [Provisional Army Council], 20 May 1987 (pp. 6-9), OFCA/7/4/046.

³⁶ Reid to [Provisional Army Council], 20 May 1987 (p. 9), OFCA/7/4/046.

astuteness in relating to other politicians, and, in general, that natural capacity for the art of politics which would fit him for a place in the cabinet of any Government.

These abilities have been conditioned and, to some extent, clouded by his political upbringing in the Republican tradition, the conflict-pressures of his work and his experiences during ‘the troubles’ of the past twenty years, a background which tends to colour his approach to political situations and to prejudice his attitudes to other politicians. He is aware, however, of the influences on him of this background and is prepared to take them into account in making assessments and in coming to decisions. I believe, therefore, that he tries and intends to be fair and objective in his political judgements.

As I know him, then, his Republican convictions are free from fanaticism and he has the potential, I believe, to become a true statesman.³⁷

The background to this extraordinary recommendation was the IRA’s response to ‘the document’, as conveyed to the NIO in September 1987 via John Hume. Reid urged the Secretary of State that the Army Council’s willingness to consider a ceasefire short of British withdrawal represented ‘the beginning of a revolution’. The way forward was now for Reid to organise a meeting between a British official and Gerry Adams, who would be attending as an MP, and with Cardinal Ó Fiaich present as a guarantor³⁸. Reid mentioned that he had now been involved with Adams for four years, which would date their collaboration all the way back to Adams’s election to the West Belfast seat.³⁹ Rather inconveniently for Father Reid, however, just as he finished his missive to Tom King three suspected IRA volunteers were arrested in the grounds of the Secretary of State’s home and charged with conspiring to kill him. In a hasty addendum to his letter Reid noted that the IRA had decided against assassinating the British ambassador to Dublin, Nicholas Fenn, in August that year, even though they possessed intelligence about his holiday plans, and he attributed this act of restraint to the influence of the contacts with the IRA made through Hume. Like the Enniskillen bomb, this fiasco was a sharp reminder of how the prosecution of the IRA campaign and the proposal for a pan-nationalist alliance were fundamentally at odds with each other.

Hume-Adams

Formal talks between the SDLP and Sinn Féin began at Clonard Monastery on [11 January 1988](#). Twenty months had passed since Father Reid first contacted John Hume. In the meantime the SDLP leader had acted as a backchannel between the British and the republican leadership, handing the IRA’s verbal response to ‘the document’ back to the Northern Ireland Office; he would do so again around Christmas 1989, when a ceasefire was briefly under discussion.⁴⁰ In March 1988 Adams forwarded to the SDLP a 21-page statement entitled ‘Towards a Strategy for Peace’⁴¹, the same paper that prompted Father Reid’s long critique. Reid was carrying it in his pocket on the day of Kevin Brady’s funeral – the day he was

³⁷ [Reid to Tom King, 6 September 1987, TNA, CJ4/8792](#).

³⁸ McBride et al, *Northern Ireland Downing Street Joint Declaration*, [Session 23248](#).

³⁹ [Reid to Tom King, 6 September 1987, TNA, CJ4/8792](#).

⁴⁰ [Reid to Tom King, 6 September 1987, TNA, CJ4/8792](#).

⁴¹ Sinn Féin, *Towards a Strategy for Peace* (March 1988), Linen Hall Library, [P3394](#).

photographed attempting to resuscitate one of the two British corporals killed by the IRA.⁴² In May Hume received a further Sinn Féin discussion paper, *A Scenario for Peace*⁴³. The composition had been ‘driven by Adams’ with the help of a small team including Mitchel McLaughlin and Danny Morrison.⁴⁴ Its organising principle was ‘N.S.D.’ *A Scenario for Peace* paraded extracts from the two United Nations Covenants of 1966 on self-determination and quoted Sean MacBride’s statement that it was ‘for the Irish people as a whole to determine the status of Ireland’. As usual, the essence of the problem was traced to ‘British colonial interference’ and above all the construction by the British of a ‘statelet’ based on an ‘artificial majority’.⁴⁵ It demanded a declaration of withdrawal to take place within the lifetime of a British parliament. A constitutional conference would then be elected to make arrangements for a new Irish state. One of the SDLP representatives at those meetings, Sean Farren, remembered that his Sinn Féin interlocutors had ‘trawled through the UN statements and conventions’ on the right to self-determination but that they lived ‘in a cocoon where ... everything that was wrong was Britain’s fault’. Consequently, the SDLP goal was ‘to penetrate the 1920s mindset’ and persuade them that some kind of accommodation between nationalists and unionists was a necessary prelude to the ending of partition.⁴⁶

During the 1980s Hume articulated a moderate and cosmopolitan variant of Irish nationalism capable of winning international sympathy as well as domestic support on both sides of the border. From the very beginning of the conflict he had maintained that the real border in Ireland was the ‘psychological barrier’ between the two communities in the North resulting from sectarian division.⁴⁷ Armed struggle was counter-productive, as well as morally unjustifiable, because it inevitably exacerbated polarisation. Hume urged that a new, pluralist Ireland could only be built upon persuasion, co-operation and partnership. It was no surprise that he invested heavily in the ‘identity talk’ that came into currency during the 1980s. Increasingly his rhetoric focused on the rights of the ‘two traditions’, the urgent need to reduce nationalist ‘alienation’ from institutions in the North, and the need for new political structures where the values, symbols and aspirations of both communities were accorded legitimacy and respect. Underpinned by cross-border institutions, this dispensation would constitute what Hume called an ‘agreed Ireland’.⁴⁸

This language – dismissed by his detractors as ‘Humespeak’ – sounded very different from old-school Irish nationalism, and Hume won admirers and allies in the Northern Ireland Office – not least John Chilcot, whom republicans persistently mischaracterised as a ‘securocrat’.⁴⁹ Sometimes, indeed, Hume presented himself as a kind of post-nationalist. The new Europe

⁴² McKeever, *One Man, One God*, pp. 33-5.

⁴³ Sinn Féin, *A Scenario for Peace* (May 1987), Linen Hall Library, [P3394](#).

⁴⁴ Danny Morrison, quoted in Spencer, *Armed Struggle to Political Struggle*, p. 126. The paper had been published in 1987.

⁴⁵ Sinn Féin, *A Scenario for Peace*, [pp. 4, 5](#).

⁴⁶ Spencer, *From Armed Struggle to Political Struggle*, p. 132.

⁴⁷ ‘John Hume’s Ireland’, *Fortnight*, 5 Feb. 1971, pp. 5-6.

⁴⁸ P. J. McLoughlin, *John Hume and the Revision of Irish Nationalism* (Manchester, 2010).

⁴⁹ Interview with Sir John Chilcot, 22 March 2021.

proved that sovereignty had changed its meaning, he suggested. The nation-state was outmoded.⁵⁰ Without ever questioning the ultimate goal of an Irish unitary state, Hume's speeches concentrated on finding an accommodation between the two cultural traditions, each one enjoying rights of self-expression within regional and all-Ireland structures, sitting within the system of layered sovereignties that was becoming the European Union. Privately, of course, the idea that Irish unity might be achieved by persuasion and partnership was unconvincing. Father Reid assured Hume that the siege mentality of the Protestants had suppressed 'the Irish soul, which deep within their hearts and peculiar to themselves, is longing to be free'.⁵¹ In practice, however, Hume put his faith in the rather more dependable mechanism of the Catholic birth-rate, which he believed would bring about constitutional change within a generation.⁵² There had been much public discussion of the 1991 census results, which showed that the Catholic proportion of the population had increased to 41.4% of the total while the Protestant community had fallen to 54.1%.⁵³ In the meantime, the SDLP's strategy was to put pressure on the British to put pressure on the Unionists to make concessions.⁵⁴ This was also the basis of the 'alternative method' that Hume recommended to the IRA.

As early as 1986 Hume was arguing that the Anglo-Irish Agreement, which bound the British government to facilitate Irish unity if a majority in the North wished for it, constituted 'a clear statement by the British Government that it has no interest of its own, either strategic or otherwise, in remaining in Ireland'.⁵⁵ The crux of his disagreement with Sinn Féin was his conviction that the primary cause of conflict was not external manipulation but the deep-rooted communal division that existed within the northern province. Hume's view, some of the time at least, departed from the orthodoxy that Ulster Protestants were simply a religious minority, with no collective rights or status as a distinct entity outside the nation. Sinn Féin still portrayed the Unionist population as a 'child of imperialism' or a 'loyalist garrison' which cravenly accepted the maintenance of its sectarian privileges as a reward for serving the interests of England. Hume contested Sinn Féin's confident prediction that in the event of British withdrawal 'a considerable body of loyalist opinion' would negotiate an accommodation within a united Ireland; the SDLP warned again that the withdrawal of British troops would lead to a territorial carve up as in Cyprus or Lebanon.

⁵⁰ 'Hume seeks to allay Unionist fears of a "hidden agenda"', *Irish Times*, 10 May 1993; John Hume, 'A New Ireland in a New Europe', in Dermot Keogh and Michael H. Haltzel (eds.), *Northern Ireland and the Politics of Reconciliation* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 226-23.

⁵¹ McKeever, *One Man, One God*, p. 127; Moloney, *Secret History*, p. 629.

⁵² Interview with Sir John Chilcot, 22 March 2021.

⁵³ It was generally believed that these trends were likely to continue: Andy Pollak *et al.* (ed.), *A Citizens' Inquiry: The Opsahl Report on Northern Ireland* (Dublin, 1993), p. 39. In the Butler-Nally meetings, however, Chilcot warned that predictions of a continuing demographic shift were based on one particular age cohort which would not be repeated: Seán Ó hUiginn, 'Report of Meeting at the Cabinet Office, July 14, 1993' (p. 4), UCD, Nally Papers 254/5.

⁵⁴ For a contemporary analysis see John Whyte, 'Why is the Northern Ireland problem so intractable?', *Parliamentary affairs* 34.4 (1981): 424-28.

⁵⁵ P. J. McLoughlin, *John Hume and the Revision of Irish Nationalism* (Manchester, 2010), p. 138.

Naturally the SDLP and Sinn Féin also clashed over the issue of self-determination. In the 26-page record of their inter-party dialogue the term appeared no fewer than 54 times. In addressing this conundrum Hume's creative genius was applied more manifestly to the practicalities of political legitimacy than to the theoretical dimension. What Hume told Sinn Féin was that the Irish people possessed the right of self-determination but they were 'divided as to how that right should be exercised'.⁵⁶ Like Hume's reworking of nationalism more generally, this formula capitalised on a deliberate obfuscation.⁵⁷ The disagreement had never been about the different forms self-determination might take (that is, an independent state, union with another sovereign state, or some kind of hybrid). The pertinent question was whether the inhabitants of Ireland, despite their opposed cultural ideas and ancestral myths, could be said to constitute one people, or whether there were two distinct national communities co-existing on the island. By the late 1980s Hume counselled that the Britishness felt by most Protestants deserved to be respected, without ever abandoning the view that they nevertheless constituted a subsection of the Irish people. Unionist writers, conversely, depicted themselves as either a separate people or part of one; consequently they did not feel bound by the decisions taken by the majority of the island's inhabitants. As the Unionist academic and politician Paddy Roche expressed it, 'Unionists do not regard themselves as part of an Irish nation and neither can they be included in an Irish nation defined in terms of ethnicity, language or other "objective" criteria.'⁵⁸

Hume's gloss on republican doctrine, however evasive, facilitated the kind of fudge essential to the undertaking of the Joint Declaration. Even more importantly, he suggested a mechanism that would enable the divided Irish self to determine its own future, a proposal that was as brilliant as it was simple. During the Sinn Féin /SDLP talks Hume 'offered to try to persuade both Government[s] to have separate referendums in each jurisdiction which would, in effect, give the Irish people the opportunity to express their wishes for the future of the entire island'.⁵⁹ In the spring of 1993 Hume was making the case publicly that any new British-Irish agreement should be subject to popular approval in joint referenda held on the same day, North and South.⁶⁰ Both Chilcot and Nally attributed the ideal of a dual plebiscite on the peace process to Hume. And he continued to press it on representatives of both governments with his usual perseverance.⁶¹ When JD6 was forwarded to the British in June 1993, an accompanying aide-mémoire drawn up by the Irish explained that the 'key concept' of the declaration was self-determination, but it was envisaged that North and South were to join in exercising this right 'separately and together'. The Taoiseach had been 'authoritatively informed' that this

⁵⁶ John Hume to Gerry Adams, 17 March 1988, Linen Hall Library, Belfast, [P3395](#). Later published online as *The Sinn Féin/SDLP Talks January - September 1998* (<https://www.sinnfein.ie/contents/15215>).

⁵⁷ Michael Cunningham, 'The Political Language of John Hume', *Irish Political Studies*, 12 (1997), pp. 13-22.

⁵⁸ Patrick J. Roche, 'Northern Ireland and Irish Nationalism: A Unionist Perspective', *Irish Review*, no. 15 (Spring, 1994), p. 70.

⁵⁹ J. E. McConnell, 'Further Discussion with Father Alex Reid', 14 August 1989, TNA, CJ4/8792.

⁶⁰ 'Hume seeks to allay Unionist fears of a "hidden agenda"', *Irish Times*, 10 May 1993.

⁶¹ For Chilcot see Seán Ó hUiginn, '[Meeting of Nally/Butler Group London, 10th September, 1993](#)' (p. 2), [UCD Archives, Nally Papers, P254/6](#); for Nally see Coakley and Todd, *Negotiating a Settlement*, p. 255.

compromise was acceptable to both Sinn Féin and the IRA and would form the basis of ‘a lasting cessation of violence’.⁶²

The idea of a joint declaration had emerged from Father Reid’s attempts to bring together John Hume, Charles Haughey and Cardinal Ó Fiaich behind his plan for an all-Ireland peace convention – a plan endorsed by the Provisional Army Council as early as 1989.⁶³ Haughey was reluctant to make any move without first securing the approval of the British government. So the idea emerged that London and Dublin might produce a combined statement ‘indicating that in the long term they both saw a better future for Northern Ireland in an Irish context within the European Community; though at the same time reaffirming that that could only come about with the consent of the Unionists’.⁶⁴ This was the basic equation sought by pan-nationalism: a declaration of British support for the principle of an all-Ireland settlement in exchange for a clear recognition among all shades of nationalism of the consent principle. Initially Hume rejected the idea – or, rather, he rejected Father Reid’s latest ‘Proposal for a Democratic Overall Political and Diplomatic Strategy for Justice, Peace and Reconciliation’.⁶⁵ A rather barbed analysis drawn up at the NIO attributed Hume’s hostility to his determination to maintain control of ‘the epic struggle for the soul of nationalism, in which he represents the forces of good’.⁶⁶ But in the following October, Hume at last composed a first rough draft, borrowing the title, ‘A strategy for peace & justice in Ireland’, from the Redemptorist priest and the style and structure from the preamble to the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985.⁶⁷ Hume’s statement had four elements reappearing in all subsequent versions, although their forms would change, sometimes quite drastically.

1. In a series of opening paragraphs the two governments lamented the persistence of conflict in Ireland and recommitted themselves both to intergovernmentalism and to the goal of an inclusive settlement. Hume’s version naturally affirmed his faith in the European project. Closer integration in the European Union, he believed, underlined the redundancy of the colonial interpretation of Britain’s role in Ireland. Given the divisions within the Conservative Party over the Maastricht Treaty, Chilcot and Thomas ensured that the ‘Euroactive’ hue of the Joint Declaration was diluted before December.

2. The crux of the declaration was a paragraph in which London spelled out its part of the basic equation. Britain no longer had any ‘selfish, strategic, political or economic interest’ in Ireland. Its sole interest was to promote peace and agreement among the inhabitants of the island. In this way Hume sought to undercut the conventional justification for armed struggle. The British later insisted that both the comma after ‘selfish’ and the word ‘political’ be removed;

⁶² [‘Aide-Memoir’, UCD, Nally Papers, P254/5](#). There is a British version, with some marginal marks, in TNA, CJ410560/57: [‘Aide Mémoire From The Irish Government Regarding JD6’, 6 June 1993](#).

⁶³ Martin Mansergh, ‘The Background to the Peace Process’, *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, vol. 6 (1995), p. 153.

⁶⁴ Chilcot and D. B. McNeill met Hume on 11 January 1991. See also McNeill, [‘Political Movement and the Provisionals: John Hume’, 4 January 1991, TNA, CJ4/9296](#). John Major first heard about the Joint Declaration initiative from Haughey in December 1991: Major, *Autobiography*, p. 447.

⁶⁵ [I. M. Burns, 6 December 1989, TNA, CJ4/9243](#).

⁶⁶ [R. O. Miles, 13 December 1989, TNA, CJ4/9243](#).

⁶⁷ Martin Mansergh has attributed the idea of a Joint Declaration to Reid: ‘The Background to the Peace Process’, *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, vol. 6 (1995), p. 153.

otherwise, as Butler explained, it would sound as if the British government were entirely indifferent to the future of the Northern Irish population.⁶⁸

3. Dublin reciprocated by confirming and amplifying its acceptance of the consent principle. As Hume put it, the ‘the Irish Government recognises that the traditional objective of Irish nationalism—the exercise of self-determination by the people of Ireland as a whole—cannot be achieved without the agreement of the people of Northern Ireland’. This was a more emphatic endorsement than article one of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, which stated that constitutional change ‘would only come about’ with the consent of the people of Northern Ireland. That fudge had been adopted to avoid a direct clash with the territorial claim over the whole island embodied in the Irish constitution of 1937. Quentin Thomas, no fan of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, objected that consent was ‘a matter of principle, not merely political reality’.⁶⁹ Thomas and David Cooke therefore took some satisfaction in the percussive effect of the final text: ‘must be achieved and exercised with and subject to the agreement and consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland’.

4. The final paragraph of Hume’s declaration called for ‘a permanent Irish Convention’ with the objective of securing self-determination for Ireland. This vehicle had been advocated by Father Reid since 1989 although, as we have seen, he viewed it more as a public relations exercise than a constituent assembly. When JD6 was forwarded to London in June 1993 Reynolds was already portraying the convention as a revival of the New Ireland Forum of 1983-4, open to all ‘democratic’ parties in Ireland, but ‘a purely consultative body’.⁷⁰ At the end of November David Cooke annotated ‘JD14’ with the outlines of a British replacement for the convention idea. It represented a reversion to the ‘nine-paragraph’ note he had drafted in response to the famous ‘conflict is over’ message received in February 1993 via the Derry backchannel.⁷¹ In return for a genuine end to violence the British had offered ‘exploratory dialogue’.⁷² That idea was now revived: Sinn Fein would be permitted to enter talks with both governments when the IRA ended its violent campaign and following ‘a sufficient interval to ensure the permanence of their intent’.⁷³

Major-Reynolds

The British government saw three early drafts emerging from the Hume-Adams dialogues, one original document from Hume (6 October 1991), one from Dublin (December 1991) and one from Sinn Fein (February 1992). Each of them envisaged a statement by the Taoiseach accepting that the exercise of the democratic right of self-determination by the people of Ireland

⁶⁸ Coakley and Todd, *Negotiating a Settlement*, p. 254. The final Downing Street Declaration thus reverted to Peter Brooke’s original statement, which denied that Britain had either a ‘selfish strategic’ or an ‘economic’ interest in remaining in Northern Ireland. In Hume’s version Britain renounced four kinds of interest: ‘selfish’, ‘strategic’, ‘political’ and ‘economic’.

⁶⁹ Coakley and Todd, *Negotiating a Settlement*, p. 289.

⁷⁰ Aide Mémoire (June 1993), UCD Archives, Nally Papers, 254/5.

⁷¹ Major, *Autobiography*, p. 443; the nine-paragraph note was sent to the IRA on 19 March 1993.

⁷² Major, *Autobiography*, p. 443.

⁷³ [‘JD14 As Shown To Molyneaux On 30 November 1993’, copy annotated by David Cooke, TNA, CJ410560/32.](#)

as a whole ‘could not in practice be achieved except with the agreement and the consent of the people of Northern Ireland’. The terms of the announcement to be made by the British Prime Minister remained uncertain, largely because the British had not yet taken the initiative very seriously. Publicly the Northern Ireland Office remained committed to making progress in the ‘three-strands’ talks between the constitutional parties in Northern Ireland initiated by Peter Brooke, even though these had stalled. Over the next year there would be many distractions. In March 1992 John Major called an election; on 10 April the IRA detonated a massive bomb at the Baltic Exchange in London and, as with the Warrington bomb a year later, the effect was to deter British engagement with what they called ‘political movement’; and the new secretary of state, Sir Patrick Mayhew, struggled to revive talks involving the constitutional parties between April and November. In Ireland, meanwhile, the government collapsed; but Reynolds, despite a poor election result, became Taoiseach for the second time, now in coalition with Dick Spring’s Labour Party.

The pace of peace work began to accelerate in June 1993. On the 6th of that month Reynolds interrupted his holiday weekend to fly by helicopter to Baldonnell military airbase, where he personally handed ‘Joint Declaration 6’ to Sir Robin Butler, the British cabinet secretary. It was a bizarre scene, reminiscent of a Cold-War thriller; but it was typical of Reynolds, who was wholly committed to the peace initiative, wholly confident about his own persuasive powers, and impatient with formal bureaucratic procedures. A meeting of the Butler-Nally group was scheduled for 13 June, with the task of preparing for a half-hour tête-à-tête between Major and Reynolds in Downing Street three days later. Dermot Nally had extensive experience of Anglo-Irish summits, having led the Irish team during the negotiations with Thatcher in the previous decade. He candidly shared with Butler his view that persevering with the Brooke-Mayhew talks was ‘like flogging a dead horse in a blind alley’. Instead he commended the new draft of the Joint Declaration, stating that ‘the Provo Army Council’ was behind it.⁷⁴ On 16 June Reynolds confirmed to Major that he had been ‘authoritatively informed’ that Sinn Féin and the IRA viewed the text as a basis for a lasting ceasefire.⁷⁵ Meanwhile Dublin officials were becoming disenchanted with John Hume. The Taoiseach warned that Hume was unreliable, adding that ‘the clergymen’ (Reid and Father Gerry Reynolds) did not trust him either: ‘John Hume is John Hume and sometimes acts as a solo merchant’.⁷⁶ The SDLP leader had been the focus of huge and often vitriolic media attention since Gerry Adams had been spotted visiting his house in Derry on 10 April. By the autumn both governments were increasingly keen to distance their deliberations from the Hume-Adams initiative.

Paragraph 4 now ran as follows:

The British Prime Minister reiterates, on behalf of the British Government, that they have no selfish, strategic, political or economic interest in Northern Ireland, and that their sole interest is to see peace, stability and reconciliation established among the people who inhabit the island. The British Government accept the principle that the Irish people have the right collectively to self-determination, and that the exercise of this right could take the form of agreed independent structures for the island as a whole. They affirm their

⁷⁴ [Dermot Nally, ‘Meeting with Cabinet Secretary Butler – 13 June, 1993’, UCD, Nally Papers, 254/5.](#)

⁷⁵ [Aide Mémoire from the Irish Government Regarding JD6, 6 June 1993, TNA, CJ410560/57.](#)

⁷⁶ [‘Tête-à-Tête Meeting Between Taoiseach and Prime Minister Major’, 17 June 1993, UCD, Nally Papers, 254/9.](#)

readiness to introduce the measures to give legislative effect on their side to this right over a period to be agreed by both Governments and allowing sufficient time for the building of consent and the beginning of a process of national reconciliation. The British Government will use all their influence and energy to win the consent of a majority in Northern Ireland for these measures. They acknowledge that it is the wish of the people of Britain to see the people of Ireland live together in unity and harmony, with respect for their diverse traditions, independent, but with full recognition of the special links and the unique relationship which exists between the peoples of Britain and Ireland.

It was an intriguing piece of prose rich in ambiguity and circumlocution, although it certainly emitted the odour of British withdrawal. In London there was genuine uncertainty about the meaning of the paragraph. In Butler's view, however, the latest Paragraph 4 'would require HMG to commit itself to three major propositions which are contrary to present Government policy'.⁷⁷ The Irish objective was to obtain an announcement from the UK government that a united Ireland was not just a legitimate aspiration but was the desirable long-term solution to the conflict: in the contemporary jargon the British would become 'persuaders' for unity. An aide-mémoire forwarded from Dublin explained that the Irish envisaged achieving an 'agreed Ireland' within a generation, involving democratic institutions in Belfast along with a North-South body equipped with executive powers. A transitional period would follow during which time 'the habit of dialogue and co-operation between North and South' combined with continuing demographic change would eventuate in an independent and united Ireland.⁷⁸ If accepted, this bold proposal would have entailed a revolution in the mental habits of the Dublin political elite just as profound as the policy shift in London. In reality, however, the bid to recruit the British into the ranks of the 'persuaders' was half-hearted. The more feasible ambition, as Seán Ó hUiginn later acknowledged, was that British policy would become weighted decisively in favour of agreement rather than of unity – in other words the sort of broad, inclusive settlement that was acceptable to nationalist Ireland.⁷⁹

British ministers were always nervous about the likely reaction of the Unionists and of sympathetic elements in the Conservative Party if it became public that they were involved in any exchanges that could be depicted as a negotiation with the IRA. Such caution was now intensified. For the most part, 'JD6' followed very closely a document communicated by Hume to John Chilcot on 26 April 1992, and assumed, correctly, to have originated with the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs. In the British system this had been labelled 'JD4'. But the bulk of the latest Paragraph 4, including the acceptance by the British government that 'the Irish people have the right collectively to self-determination' was an interpellation from another, more troubling source. Butler noted that this 'alternative passage' had been 'proposed

⁷⁷ ['Joint Declaration Text 6 and Irish Government Aide-Mémoire: Commentary', Northern Ireland Office, 10 June 1993, TNA, CJ410560/58.](#)

⁷⁸ [Aide Mémoire \(June 1993\), UCD Archives, Nally Papers, 254/5.](#)

⁷⁹ Coakley and Todd, *Negotiating a Settlement*, p. 286. The persuader concept had a long history. During the Treaty debates of 1921 Lloyd George took the view that although London could not 'coerce Ulster' that did not 'preclude us from endeavouring to persuade Ulster to come into an All-Ireland Parliament' (Matthews, *Fatal Influence*, p. 59). Both Lloyd George and Michael Collins believed that the boundary commission and the financial restrictions imposed on the Northern government by the Treaty could be used to pressurise Craig.

by the PAC [Provisional Army Council] and conveyed by Mr Hume in June 1992'.⁸⁰ Consequently he pronounced the new Paragraph 4 'totally unacceptable'.⁸¹

Major's response to the Baldonnell paper was a characteristically courteous version of Thatcher's famous 'out, out, out' speech, in which she rejected the three options proposed by the New Ireland Forum in 1984. Reasonably enough, Major protested that telling the Unionists they were no longer wanted was difficult to reconcile with the consent principle; so too was talk of a timeframe for change; the 'crucial objection', meanwhile, was the assertion of 'collective' self-determination for the Irish people.⁸² After all, the consent principle was not merely a concession in the gift of the Irish government; it was the foundation stone of Britain's policy on Northern Ireland. Politically, Major warned that such a dramatic rupture with London's stance would drive the Unionists onto the streets, as happened in 1985-86, and lead to an escalation of loyalist paramilitary activity. This was a serious consideration. In 1993 loyalists had killed 46 people, mostly Catholic civilians, compared to 38 deaths attributed to republican paramilitaries. They had begun to bomb SDLP offices, justifying these attacks on the grounds that the Hume-Adams dialogue was conferring legitimacy on republican terrorism. If loyalist violence continued on its upward trajectory, Butler argued, the IRA would be compelled to remain on a war footing, and it would not be possible to reduce the British military commitment. Major's prediction was more stark: adopting JD6 would lead to 'maximum bloodshed'.⁸³

Major personally liked Albert Reynolds, who was in truth very difficult to dislike. He believed that the Taoiseach's motives were honourable. It was wrong, he felt, to rebuff a sincere approach from another prime minister.⁸⁴ But the firm British view was that the Hume-Adams position was fatally slanted towards nationalism; they dreaded the Unionist reaction if news broke that the government was drafting a secret agreement. They were preoccupied by the backchannel communications following 'the conflict is over' message apparently sent by Martin McGuinness. The British were 'living on tenterhooks'.⁸⁵ Butler was nevertheless anxious to be seen to respond constructively to Dublin's proposals. So while the NIO team refused to negotiate over a joint text, they agreed to submit some 'amendments'.⁸⁶ In practice the matter was devolved to Seán Ó hUiginn and Quentin Thomas. The former was sometimes blunt in meetings of the Liaison group but had a subtle grasp of the conceptual frameworks applicable to Anglo-Irish relations and the psychological relations of domination and

⁸⁰ ['Joint Declaration Text 6 and Irish Government Aide-Mémoire: Commentary', Northern Ireland Office, 10 June 1993, TNA, CJ410560/58.](#) The version containing the alternative passage was JD5.

⁸¹ [Robin Butler to Roderic Lyne, 6 June 1993, TNA, CJ410560/55.](#)

⁸² [Butler to Lyne, 6 June 1993, TNA, CJ410560/55; Dermot Nally, 'Meeting with Cabinet Secretary Butler – 13 June, 1993', 15 June 1993, UCD, Nally Papers, 254/5.](#)

⁸³ ['Tête-à-Tête Meeting Between Taoiseach and Prime Minister Major', 17 June 1993, UCD, Nally Papers, 254/5.](#)

⁸⁴ Robin Butler, quoted in Coakley and Todd, *Negotiating a Settlement*, p. 233.

⁸⁵ Coakley and Todd, *Negotiating a Settlement*, p. 234.

⁸⁶ Coakley and Todd, *Negotiating a Settlement*, p. 233.

dependence expressed by them.⁸⁷ The latter was regarded by the British as a ‘master drafter’.⁸⁸ This delegation of drafting responsibility was partly a means of getting around the fact that Butler had not received clearance from the Prime Minister to proceed further with the peace initiative.

And so, on 1 September, Thomas handed to Ó hUiginn a list of twelve extracts from previous British statements which he thought might be helpful.⁸⁹ On 10 September the British reiterated that they were happy to supply ‘texts and references’ but would ‘not indulge in drafting’.⁹⁰ Chilcot wondered aloud whether Hume’s proposal for a dual referendum might provide a means of reconciling the right of the Irish people to choose their own future with ‘the separate exercise of Northern Ireland doing so as a separate choice’.⁹¹ At another meeting two weeks later Quentin Thomas suggested, ‘purely on a personal basis’, that the following formulation might do the trick: ‘Both Governments agree that it is for the people of the island of Ireland alone to exercise any rights of self-determination to bring about a united Ireland on the basis of freely given consent North and South.’⁹² A solution to the conundrum of self-determination was beginning to emerge.

Making peace in Northern Ireland was impossible without grabbing the dilemma by both horns. Chilcot later explained that the ‘clear strategy’ shared by his circle was ‘essentially to hold the Unionist majority, as it were, in check and attract and entice nationalism, including its republican expression, into dialogue’.⁹³ But the Unionist leadership still had to be properly confronted. Perhaps the Irish believed that Major’s predictions of a Protestant backlash were an excuse for inertia. Irish officials spoke wearily of the ‘British art of drowning you in process’.⁹⁴ In any case, Reynolds, ever the optimistic salesman, now resolved to bypass London and do business directly with the Protestants. In November he added three further paragraphs (Paragraphs 6-8), in consultation with the Anglican Archbishop of Armagh, Robin Eames, designed to calm Unionist fears of Irish nationalism. Rather more startling was the channel of communication opened up with the Combined Loyalist Military Command via the Presbyterian minister Roy Magee.⁹⁵ At the very last minute Mansergh added to Paragraph 5 a

⁸⁷ Mallie and McKittrick, *Fight for Peace*, p. 226.

⁸⁸ Mallie and McKittrick, *Fight for Peace*, p. 106.

⁸⁹ [Seán Ó hUiginn, ‘Meeting with Mr Quentin Thomas’, 2 September 1993, UCD Archives, Nally Papers, P254/6.](#)

⁹⁰ [Seán Ó hUiginn, ‘Meeting of Nally/Butler Group London, 10th September 1993’, UCD Archives, Nally Papers, P254/6.](#)

⁹¹ [Seán Ó hUiginn, ‘Meeting of Nally/Butler Group London, 10th September, 1993’, UCD Archives, Nally Papers, P254/6, p. 2.](#)

⁹² [Seán Ó hUiginn, ‘Meeting Quentin Thomas at NIO, London’, 25 September 1993, UCD Archives, Nally Papers, P254/6.](#)

⁹³ Quoted in Ó Dochartaigh, *Deniable Contact*, p. 205.

⁹⁴ Todd, ‘Thresholds of State Change’, p. 530.

⁹⁵ Mansergh met Rev. Roy Magee on 29 September: [‘Meeting with Roy Magee’, signed ‘MM’, UCD Archives, Nally Papers, P254/6;](#) [‘Record of a Telephone Conversation Between Albert Reynolds and John Major on 29](#)

pledge by the Irish government to respect a number of civil and religious rights which had previously appeared, albeit in rudimentary form, in the UVF magazine, *Combat*:

- the right of free political thought;
- the right of freedom and expression of religion;
- the right to pursue democratically national and political aspirations;
- the right to seek constitutional change by peaceful and legitimate means;
- the right to live wherever one chooses without hindrance;
- the right to equal opportunity in all social and economic activity, regardless of class, creed, sex or colour.

Considering that Paragraph 4 had now been subject to intermittent revision by different hands over a period of two years, it is remarkable that the Unionist and loyalist additions were incorporated so hastily. The only amendment to Magee's list had been the insertion by Fergus Finlay of a reference to gender equality in the final item, to read 'regardless of class, creed, *sex* or colour', enabling him to quip that he was the man who had put sex into the Downing Street Declaration.⁹⁶ Magee later suggested that the six civil rights were designed by loyalists to be the basis of a Bill of Rights that would make Catholics feel secure in Northern Ireland; in Dublin they were transmuted into reassurances about the treatment of Protestants within a future agreed Ireland.⁹⁷ Championed by the Women's Coalition, the 'Magee list' was subsequently incorporated into the Good Friday Agreement and, as a result of the Northern Ireland Protocol, the six rights are now enforceable in both domestic and international law.⁹⁸

As December approached Reynolds was satisfied that the fundamentals of the Joint Declaration were in place. The two teams involved in the Butler-Nally meetings were busy preparing for a summit to take place at Dublin Castle on the 3rd. The Irish objective, in Mansergh's words, was not only to secure an IRA ceasefire, but to achieve 'a comprehensive political settlement of the question which had been open, to a greater or lesser degree, since the 1920s, and was to do with the option of a united Ireland in the future.'⁹⁹ Ó hUiginn visualised the solution as creating an 'outside envelope' of self-determination for Ireland within which the 'inside envelope' of the consent principle might safely be folded.¹⁰⁰ Here was an acceptable resolution of what he and others sometimes called the 'theology' of the peace process.¹⁰¹ Henceforth the Unionists would exercise a veto on constitutional change (for as long as they formed a majority in Northern Ireland); but they would have this veto because 'the people of Ireland' had given it to them. In Dublin public opinion was firmly behind the initiative. 'Albert's riding the peace

[November 1993', TNA, CJ410560/34](#). A British draft dated 9 December 1993 referred to the 'Magee list' as forthcoming on Monday, i.e. 13 December: ['JD15B', 9 December 1993, TNA, CJ410560/16](#).

⁹⁶ Fergus Finlay, *Snakes and Ladders* (Dublin, 1998), p. 201.

⁹⁷ Mallie and McKittrick, *Fight for Peace*, p. 224.

⁹⁸ See Christopher McCrudden, 'The Origins of "Civil Rights" in the Good Friday Agreement', forthcoming.

⁹⁹ 'Interview with Martin Mansergh', Spencer, *Inside Accounts, I*, p. 175.

¹⁰⁰ 'Interview with Seán Ó hUiginn', Spencer, *Inside Accounts, I*, p. 130.

¹⁰¹ 'Interview with Seán Ó hUiginn', Spencer, *Inside Accounts, I*, p. 144.

train now’, one internal source remarked in the aftermath of the Fianna Fáil *ard fheis*.¹⁰² But in all the excitement no one seemed to have noticed that John Major was not on board.

5. A Pretty Orange document in Green language

Just twelve days before the Declaration was announced, at the long-awaited bilateral summit in the James Connolly room in Dublin Castle, the whole enterprise suddenly began to unravel. It was a spectacularly bad-tempered meeting. Reynolds accused Major of bad faith; the prime minister snapped his pencil in frustration and threatened to walk out.¹⁰³ At the eleventh hour, the British had produced a radically new draft of their own, dropping the emphasis on self-determination, or rather camouflaging it. Was this a miscalculation? Was it an act of sabotage? Or somewhere in-between? Butler has claimed that the Irish text was ‘a dog’s breakfast’, and the aim of the British rewrite was simply to clarify the compromise they had worked out. But the overriding priority in London was to remove the ‘fingerprints’ of John Hume and Gerry Adams from the text. Unionist unease had been magnified by a leaked document which appeared in the *Irish Press* on 19 November under the headline ‘Secret plan says Britain to recognise goal of unity’. The journalist Emily O’Reilly reported that a joint declaration by both governments would endorse the Hume-Adams initiative; some version of joint authority was envisaged, operating alongside North-South institutions with executive functions.¹⁰⁴ On the following day John Hume and Gerry Adams issued a joint statement designed to put pressure on the two governments. Previous statements had prompted intense speculation in the press about the contents of the Hume-Adams ‘report’, ‘plan’, or ‘proposals’ apparently in the hands of the Taoiseach.¹⁰⁵ Major wrote to Reynolds on 25 November warning that any association with Hume-Adams would be the ‘kiss of death’ for the peace initiative.¹⁰⁶

Major had resolved early in his term as prime minister ‘to put Northern Ireland onto the front burner’.¹⁰⁷ No doubt he was encouraged by Peter Brooke, who kick-started the three-strand talks, favoured improving relations with Dublin, authorised the re-opening of ‘the Link’ with the IRA, and announced in the seminal Whitbread speech of November 1990 that London had ‘no selfish strategic or economic interest’ in Northern Ireland.¹⁰⁸ But when Major looked for a successor to replace Brooke he chose Sir Patrick Mayhew, whom he had served as PPS in 1981; and Mayhew, ‘a man of unquestioned integrity’, was cautious with regard to Sinn Féin. As Attorney General, Mayhew had taken a belligerent stance with the Irish government over

¹⁰² Mallie and McKittrick, *Fight for Peace*, p. 221.

¹⁰³ Mallie and McKittrick, *Fight for Peace*, pp. 261-2; Finlay, *Snakes and Ladders*, p. 202.

¹⁰⁴ Emily O’Reilly ‘Secret plan says Britain to recognise goal of unity’, *Irish Press*, 19 November 1993.

¹⁰⁵ Mallie and McKittrick, *Fight for Peace*, p. 209. The Irish press was dominated by discussion of Hume-Adams on 20-21 October. See, for example, ‘Hostility and denials not making it easy to open window of opportunity’, *Irish Times*, 20 November 1993; ‘Hume-Adams report will not be given to Britain, says Reynolds’, *Irish Times*, 21 October 1993

¹⁰⁶ [John Major to Albert Reynolds, 25 November 1993, TNA, CJ410560/40.](#)

¹⁰⁷ John Major, *John Major: The Autobiography* (London, 1999), p. 434.

¹⁰⁸ Peter Brooke, ‘Whitbread’ Speech, 9 November 1990, reprinted in John Coakley and Jennifer Todd, *Negotiating a Settlement in Northern Ireland, 1969-2019* (Oxford, 2020), p. 298.

the extradition of terrorist suspects.¹⁰⁹ His appointment was more likely to reassure backbench Tories than boost the pragmatists in the Republican Movement. Joint membership of the EU and economic growth in the Republic encouraged Major's business-like approach to Anglo-Irish relations. But the prime minister was continually harassed by the 'bastards' – Eurosceptic rebels like Bill Cash, Teresa Gorman, Nicholas Budgen and the future party leader Iain Duncan Smith. He fretted about those Tories who would assume he was being conned by the IRA and about the Ulster Unionists who would accuse him of treachery – and he worried about them in that order.¹¹⁰ Although he found Reynolds 'cheery and loquacious' he knew the Taoiseach was prone to 'the odd spot of embroidery'.¹¹¹ The prime minister preferred to deal with Adams and McGuinness through the secret backchannel rather than the Redemptorist connection established by Mansergh, and it was only when the backchannel collapsed in November 1993 that his attention switched to the Joint Declaration, which he had always regarded as hopelessly skewed towards Irish nationalism. And so he turned to the tight-lipped James Molyneaux, who was respected on the Conservative benches: 'His help would be invaluable, his opposition fatal.'¹¹²

Molyneaux had been shown a version of the Joint Declaration as early as 1 September. He pronounced it 'far too green' and advised that it was 'not going anywhere'.¹¹³ The Ulster Unionist Party could not be ignored, partly because Molyneaux had delivered nine votes for Major in a knife-edge vote over the Maastricht Treaty in July 1993, but more importantly because the British feared alienating the Protestant community as they had done in 1985. Fortunately the UUP leader, now aged 73, was equally anxious not to discomfit his Tory friends. Molyneaux was that rare thing, a Unionist leader who preferred to avoid confrontation. In a characteristically sharp entry in the *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, Patrick Maume comments: 'Molyneaux was chronically inclined to mistake personal amiability – encouraged by shared wartime experiences – from British MPs and prominent figures for committed political sympathy and to underestimate how his semi-reclusiveness and near-teetotalism distanced him from the deeper social currents of Westminster'.¹¹⁴ It was Molyneaux's custom to meet government ministers alone. The tone was generally cosy. On 25 November Molyneaux had lunch with Michael Ancram who recorded that the Ulster Unionist leader would give 'silent acquiescence to a text along the lines he was shown, subject to a few, mainly cosmetic, changes'.¹¹⁵ Molyneaux preferred to speak of 'a greater number' of the Northern Irish electorate, for instance, rather than 'a majority' – the implication being that support for the union was not confined to the Protestant majority community. This was a rather niche point. He was relatively unperturbed about the 'theological' aspects of Paragraph 4, but advised that a re-ordering of its contents would minimise Unionist alarm:

¹⁰⁹ See *ODNB*.

¹¹⁰ Major, *Autobiography*, p. 431. The Home Secretary Ken Clarke was also sceptical about making contact with the Provisionals (Mallie and McKittrick, *Fight for Peace*, p. 251).

¹¹¹ Major, *Autobiography*, p. 440.

¹¹² Major, *Autobiography*, p. 450.

¹¹³ John Coakley and Jennifer Todd, *Negotiating a Settlement in Northern Ireland, 1969-2019* (Oxford, 2020), p.

¹¹⁴ *DIB*.

¹¹⁵ [Stephens to Lyne, 'Joint Declaration Initiative: Lunch with Mr Molyneaux', 25 November 1993.](#)

Molyneux was uncomfortable with the phrase ‘the people of Ireland alone’. This sounds as if the British wanted to cut themselves off from Northern Ireland and wash their hands of the problem. But he was tentatively happy when Ancram suggested redrafting the crucial clause on consent in a different order. If the constitutional guarantee came first, the reference to the people of the island alone would lose its negative impact.¹¹⁶

The major objection made by Molyneux concerned the plans for an Irish convention outlined in the final two paragraphs of the text, which sounded too much like an embryonic all-Ireland parliament. With some minor modifications, however, Molyneux reassured Ancram that the Joint Declaration ‘would not cause him to expostulate’. He seems to have accepted the ministerial explanation that the declaration was a means of outmanoeuvring the IRA, who would call a ceasefire in any case and exploit the subsequent media excitement in order to pressurise the UK government into making concessions. It is possible that intelligence was shared with the Unionist leader, who was a privy councillor. Although intelligence assessments do not generally feature in the archives there is an exception in a letter from Major’s private secretary, describing a meeting on Northern Ireland on 23 November. The veteran MI5 officer John Deverell was present and was presumably the source of the following report:

... debate within PIRA appeared to be continuing. No conclusion had been reached. McGuinness seemed somewhat isolated. There was considerable opposition to a cessation of violence. Attacks on the Security Forces continued. However, at brigade level a ceasefire of three months was under discussion...¹¹⁷

More tête-à-tête conversations with Molyneux followed. At the suggestion of Albert Reynolds, Major and Ancram met the Unionist leader again for an hour on 29 November, finding him ‘in relaxed and genial form’.¹¹⁸ The next day, Ancram went through ‘JD14’ with him line-by-line. Once more, given the circumstances, Molyneux was quite accommodating. The NIO officials were aware that securing Molyneux’s private good did not mean that they could count on the support of his party.¹¹⁹ But it is worth recalling that the Labour Party was then committed to a policy of Irish unification by consent: Unionist MPs had no interest in seeing the Tories defeated, and consequently their leverage was limited. By this point the ‘constitutional guarantee’ had already been added to the document. This term of art referred to the Northern Ireland Constitution Act of 1973, which stipulated that the status of Northern Ireland could not be changed without the consent of a majority of people in Northern Ireland voting in a poll held for that purpose.¹²⁰ Of course this was simply another expression of the consent principle; but it was doubly offensive to republicans because it derived from British

¹¹⁶ [Roderic Lyne to Jonathan Stephens, 30 November 1993, TNA, CJ410560/31](#); [Stephens to Lyne, ‘Joint Declaration Initiative: Lunch with Mr Molyneux’, \[25\] November 1993 TNA, CJ410484/13](#).

¹¹⁷ [Roderic Lyne to Jonathan Stephens, ‘Ministerial Meeting on Northern Ireland: 23 November’, TNA, CJ410560/44](#). For the background see [Roderic Lyne to Jonathan Stephens, 29 November 1993, TNA, CJ410560/35](#).

¹¹⁸ [‘Prime Minister’s meeting with Mr Jim Molyneux MP, Monday 29 November’, Roderic Lyne to Jonathan Stephens, 30 November 1993, CJ410560/36](#).

¹¹⁹ [Quentin Thomas to \[Sir Patrick Mayhew\], 29 November 1993, TNA, CJ410560/33](#). Molyneux appeared to have party approval for the notion that Sinn Féin might enter talks if violence was given up and after a lengthy ‘quarantine’ period: see ‘Unionists endorse policy shift’, *Irish Times*, 18 October, 1993

¹²⁰ Brigid Hadfield, *Northern Ireland Constitution*, p. 9.

legislation, and it fuelled complaints that the government had granted Unionists a veto over political change. Quentin Thomas had drafted a new Paragraph 4 with the key section now running as follows:

The British government reaffirm Northern Ireland's statutory guarantee that it will not cease to be part of the U.K. without the consent of a majority of its people; agree that the people of the island of Ireland, North and South separately, should be free, without coercion or violence, to determine whether a united Ireland should be established; and accordingly agree that it is for the people of the island of Ireland alone, on the basis of freely and concurrently given consent, North and South, to exercise their right of self determination to bring about a united Ireland, if that is their wish.¹²¹

The Irish right of self-determination was thus firmly subordinated to the Unionist position. Almost certainly the rewrite would be rejected by the Irish, but Thomas was coming round to the view that the best outcome might in any case be a unilateral declaration by the UK government.¹²² (Indeed he had already prepared one, and sent it to Mayhew on 29 November.)¹²³ The text shown to Molyneaux had also envisaged the North and South exercising their right of self-determination 'concurrently' – rather than 'collectively', as the Irish had preferred. Molyneaux's willingness to accept the initiative was dependent on this substitution, 'carrying the clear implication that there are two separate, if simultaneous, consents required'.¹²⁴

Confusingly, the archival record shows that the British were working on two quite different texts during the last week of November. Robin Butler had delivered the new British draft to Reynolds on 26 November, with an accompanying letter from Major explaining that the newspaper leak on 19 November and the Hume-Adams statement of the following day meant there was 'no hope of securing even tacit acceptance by the Unionist mainstream of a Joint Declaration along the lines you suggest'.¹²⁵ Reynolds replied indignantly that they should not 'be trying to start again from scratch, bringing to nought eighteen months of patient work'.¹²⁶ As the bilateral summit approached British officials were pessimistic about the chances of a successful outcome. Chilcot's team at the NIO was now considering how best to manage the media reaction in the event of a rupture in the Anglo-Irish relationship. Ministers were briefed that an agreement centring on 'the notion of "self-determination"', would be received, particularly by Unionists, as 'a craven surrender to the demands made by the Irish Government

¹²¹ ['Amendment by Quentin Thomas to Paragraph 4 of the Joint Declaration \[JD14\], n.d. c. December 1993, TNA, CJ410560/21.](#)

¹²² [Thomas to Mayhew, 29 November 1993, TNA, CJ410560/33.](#)

¹²³ Quentin Thomas prepared a unilateral declaration on 29 November - [Thomas to Mayhew, 29 November 1993, TNA, CJ410560/33.](#) This was a reworking of the alternative British draft, with some amendments requested by Molyneaux.

¹²⁴ [DAL Cooke to \[Quentin\] Thomas, 1 December 1993, TNA, CJ410560/27,](#) reporting on the Ancram/Molyneaux meeting held on 30 November and enclosing an amended version of 'JD14'; see also [Joint Declaration Initiative: The Text', briefing notes for 3 December summit \[n.d. c. 2 December 1993\], TNA, CJ410894/11.](#)

¹²⁵ [Major to Reynolds, 25 November 1993, TNA, CJ410560/40.](#)

¹²⁶ [Reynolds to Major, 29 November 1993, TNA, CJ410560/37.](#)

at the behest of Adams'.¹²⁷ When they arrived in Dublin the London delegation was equipped with three different texts. The first, 'JD14', was the most recent Irish version with 'sticking points' – wording considered objectionable – highlighted; the second was the British alternative draft, already conveyed to the Taoiseach on 26 November; and finally there was 'JD14A', a halfway house which contained amendments and 'non-essential bargaining points, designed to produce a more Unionist-friendly text'.¹²⁸

There was genuine indignation in Dublin at what appeared to be casual contempt for months of work. The normally unflappable Dermot Nally thought the submission of a new draft was 'unforgivable' and told Albert Reynolds that the British were treating him like the 'Prime Minister of Tonga'.¹²⁹ The NIO was well aware that Reynolds would refuse even to discuss the British version, but hoped it would serve as 'a quarry for language more friendly to British interests'. When shown the latest revisions to Paragraph 4 Reynolds complained, 'There is nothing in it on which the fellows can hang their hats. The balance of the document has been overwhelmingly disturbed.'¹³⁰ The alternative draft also revised the pledge to be made by the Taoiseach. In the event of a broad settlement being achieved, Paragraph 5 now offered 'a change in the Irish Constitution whereby the claim of right to Northern Ireland is no longer exerted and the principle of freely given consent in Northern Ireland is fully reflected'. To this alteration Reynolds commented: 'we will not be seen to be going down on our knees'.¹³¹ But the British rewrite nevertheless permitted Major's team to establish some control over the agenda. Instead of the UK government battling to insert amendment after amendment into JD14 Reynolds was now forced to negotiate away from the alternative draft.

One of the curious features of the Dublin Castle summit was the size of the two delegations. There were sixteen on the Irish side and eleven for the UK. Major was accompanied by the Foreign Secretary (Douglas Hurd) as well as Sir Patrick Mayhew; Reynolds brought with him the Tánaiste and Foreign Affairs minister (Dick Spring) and the Minister for Justice (Máire Geoghegan Quinn). The unusually large number on both teams probably contributed to the pressure on the two premiers to stick to their positions.¹³² The Irish were incensed by press revelations about the backchannel; the British believed that Dublin had been briefing the press against them.¹³³ On the Irish side the performative dimension of the negotiations may have been magnified by republican expectations. Sinn Féin, as Seán Ó hUiginn remarked, were very

¹²⁷ ['Joint Declaration Initiative: The Text', briefing notes for 3 December summit \[n.d. c. 2 December 1993\], TNA, CJ410894/11.](#)

¹²⁸ ['Joint Declaration Initiative: The Text', briefing notes for 3 December summit \[n.d. c. 2 December 1993\], TNA, CJ410894/11.](#)

¹²⁹ Fergal Finlay, *Snakes and Ladders* (Dublin, 1998), p. 201.

¹³⁰ ['Working Meeting between Taoiseach and PM Major: Dublin Castle, 3 December 1993', p. 20, UCD, Nally Papers, P254/9.](#)

¹³¹ ['Working Meeting between Taoiseach and PM Major: Dublin Castle, 3 December 1993', p. 10, UCD, Nally Papers, P254/9.](#) See also ['Tête-à-Tête Meeting between Taoiseach and Prime Minister Major', 17 June 1993, UCD, Nally Papers, 254/9.](#)

¹³² Mallie and McKittrick, *Fight for Peace*, p. 262.

¹³³ They cited the front page of the previous day's *Irish Times*: 'Hope for NI progress persists, though British proposals rejected', *Irish Times*, 2 December 1993.

conscious of the imbalance of power between London and Dublin. ‘London will eat you for breakfast’, they said. The debate quickly became so steamed up that Major and Reynolds agreed to a private session, at first alone and then with Rod Lyne and Martin Mansergh taking notes. Lyne reported that there had been ‘very frank’ exchanges. Reynolds told his team: ‘I chewed his bollocks off and he took a few lumps outa me’.¹³⁴

Although Reynolds now seemed less confident about the prospects of a ceasefire, he continued to believe that the governments could not afford to let the opportunity slip away. ‘If we are willing to confront them’, he insisted, ‘there is a mood and a momentum out there to be seized.’¹³⁵ The Joint Declaration would put the IRA in a dilemma: ‘It would be damaging and demoralising for the organisation to have to reject peace after extensive canvassing of a cessation of violence.’¹³⁶ The Taoiseach also warned that the process of generational change presented the governments with a chance to capitalise on war-weariness among IRA veterans, whereas delay ran the risk that ‘a new generation of Young Turks might take over.’¹³⁷ For Major the central objective was to secure greater recognition of the ‘constitutional guarantee’. When the British were spelling out their willingness to legislate for a united Ireland at some point in the future it was only fair that they should confirm the current legislative position on part of the Union. In a plenary session in the late afternoon the two sides went through JD14 paragraph by paragraph. Differences remained over the constitutional guarantee, Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish constitution, and the proposed convention. For the most part Major and Reynolds agreed to ‘park’ the issues rather than attempted to resolve them. By narrowing the focus, however, Lyne was able to report anti-climactically that ‘the outstanding difficulties were serious but not insurmountable’.¹³⁸ The remaining textual refinements were left once more to Seán Ó hUiginn, Quentin Thomas and the fax machine. It now remained to be seen whether, as Thomas liked to put it, the lobsters could be tempted into the pots.¹³⁹

On 29 November 1993, as the Joint Declaration initiative appeared to be unravelling, an exasperated British ambassador wrote from Dublin lamenting that ‘this is a country where civil

¹³⁴ [Roderic Lyne to Jonathan Stephens, 3 December 1993, TNA, CJ410560/22](#); Mallie and McKittrick, *Fight for Peace*, p. 259.

¹³⁵ [‘Working Meeting between Taoiseach and PM Major: Dublin Castle, 3 December 1993’ \(p. 4\), UCD, Nally Papers, P254/9.](#)

¹³⁶ [Roderic Lyne, ‘Tête-à-Tête Meeting between the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach, Dublin Castle, 3 December 1993’, CJ410560/23.](#)

¹³⁷ [‘Working Meeting between Taoiseach and PM Major: Dublin Castle, 3 December 1993’ \(pp. 3-4\), UCD, Nally Papers, P254/9.](#) Seán Ó hUiginn had previously made the argument about generational change, a factor in the resurgence of Loyalist paramilitarism: [Seán Ó hUiginn, ‘Meeting in the Cabinet Office, London, 10 November 1993’, UCD, Nally Papers, P254/8.](#)

¹³⁸ [Lyne to Stephens, 3 December 1993, TNA, CJ410560/22.](#)

¹³⁹ Dean Godson, *Himself Alone: David Trimble and the Ordeal of Unionism* (London, 2004), pp. 816-17.

wars are fought over words'.¹⁴⁰ Not everyone on the British side fully grasped the significance that the issue of self-determination held for their Irish partners. It is not difficult to see why they were perplexed. In all, the Joint Declaration had gone through more than twenty drafts. Since 'Major-Reynolds', had been adapted from Hume-Adams, which had itself evolved out of 'Reid-Adams', it could be said that the text had been seven years in the making. Everyone involved knew that the real audience was the IRA and that the concept of self-determination was the pivot. How much weight should be attached to this slippery concept was the most important cause of the explosive summit at Dublin Castle on 3 December. Quentin Thomas has rightly observed that the Republican Movement was executing a stunning U-turn. Sinn Féin would have to travel a much greater distance than any other party, from 'saying that Northern Ireland was an illegitimate mini-state and blah blah to actually being ministers in the wretched thing'.¹⁴¹ After 25 years of 'war' the IRA apparently laid down its weapons in return for a purely symbolic concession. The 'people of Ireland', after all, was a moral or ideological fiction. It was not a juridical entity and, as such, it possessed no legally enforceable rights at all. British officials were mystified by the confidence their Irish counterparts placed in the magic formula contained in paragraph four – despite the fact that their own intelligence agents confirmed that the IRA were edging towards a ceasefire.

The British regarded self-determination as an eccentric piece of metaphysics that they instinctively disliked but reluctantly, in the end, were prepared to swallow. They certainly knew that the concept was fraught with danger. After all, they had been prepared to tell the press that 'the notion of "self-determination" would be viewed by Unionists as 'a craven surrender' to the Republican Movement.¹⁴² In the event they accepted the Joint Declaration only because the republican shibboleth had been fenced in with 'lots of subordinate clauses', the function of which was to ensure that 'Northern Ireland as a unit—or the majority of the people of Northern Ireland—have an arm-lock on it at each step'.¹⁴³ Indeed the consent principle appears no fewer than five times in the Downing Street Declaration. Consider the ratchet effect of the statement made by Albert Reynolds in paragraph 5, which David Cooke further reinforced by adding the words 'subject to'.¹⁴⁴

[The Taoiseach] accepts, on behalf of the Irish Government, 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 of Northern Ireland... (my italics)

¹⁴⁰ [David Blatherwick to Graham Archer, 29 November 1993, TNA, CH4/10572.](#)

¹⁴¹ Coakley and Todd, *Negotiating a Settlement*, p. 249.

¹⁴² ['Joint Declaration Initiative: The Text', briefing notes for 3 December summit \[n.d. c. 2 December 1993\], TNA, CJ410894/11.](#)

¹⁴³ Quentin Thomas, in Coakley and Todd, *Negotiating a Settlement*, p. 255.

¹⁴⁴ Coakley and Todd, *Negotiating a Settlement*, p. 258; interview with Quentin Thomas and David Cooke, 5 March 2021.

Consequently there is much to be said for Michael Ancram's verdict that the British had 'delivered a pretty Orange document in green language'.¹⁴⁵

But securing the consent principle was certainly not the same thing as securing the Union – at least not as the Ulster Unionists conceived of it. At a meeting of Butler-Nally group in August 1993, John Chilcot observed that 'the unionists communicated in small print, the nationalists in rhetoric and ideology'.¹⁴⁶ This contrast could be extended to the approaches adopted by London and Dublin respectively. The Irish cared about self-determination because it was part of their own political and psychological makeup. It was enshrined in article one of the Irish constitution. The term signified a shared dilemma. Conversely the fierce resolution with which the British defended the consent principle tended to underline their detachment from Northern Ireland, long viewed as 'a place apart'.

The UK government's position, John Major has written, was founded on its insistence that '[t]he democratic right of self-determination had to remain within Northern Ireland'. The June version of the Joint Declaration was rejected, he explained, because 'Northern Ireland was *not* offered the right of self-determination'. In Major's memoirs he speaks as if the whole point of the Downing Street Declaration was 'that Dublin acknowledged Northern Ireland's democratic right to self-determination'.¹⁴⁷ In fact the people of Northern Ireland have been granted the right to vote on one single issue: whether Ireland should be united. They do not have the right to establish an 'independent Ulster' or to obtain 'dominion status', as David Trimble had demanded as recently as 1988.¹⁴⁸ Nor does the Declaration recognise the existence of a separate national or subnational entity in the North of Ireland – what Trimble described in 1991 as the 'Ulster-British people'.¹⁴⁹ At the August meeting of the Butler-Nally group there was a brief discussion of the distinction between 'the people of Ireland' and 'the peoples of Ireland' but it was generally assumed at Whitehall and Westminster that the inhabitants of the island were Irish.¹⁵⁰ There was nothing at all in the Downing Street Declaration to suggest that Unionists were part of the British nation, that Ulster Protestants and the other peoples of the United Kingdom shared a common history or formed an imagined community. Years later, when Butler, Nally and Thomas participated in the witness seminars organised by Jennifer Todd and John Coakley, this revealing exchange took place:¹⁵¹

Q: The Irish government said it is for the Irish people North and South to define their own future. Is this not effectively saying that unionists are Irish? It doesn't give unionists the right of self-determination?

Butler: I can't understand the point.

¹⁴⁵ Dean Godson, *Himself Alone: David Trimble and the Ordeal of Unionism* (London, 2004), p. 115.

¹⁴⁶ [Dermot Nally, 'Northern Ireland' \[account of meeting at cabinet office, London, 4 August 1993\], UCD, Nally Papers, P254.](#)

¹⁴⁷ Major, *Autobiography*, pp. 439, 441, 448, 449.

¹⁴⁸ David Trimble, *What Choice for Ulster* (Lurgan, 1988).

¹⁴⁹ David Trimble, *The Foundation of Northern Ireland* (Lurgan, 1991), p. 1.

¹⁵⁰ Dermot Nally, 'Northern Ireland' [account of meeting at cabinet office, London, 4 August 1993]

¹⁵¹ Coakley and Todd, *Negotiating a Settlement*, p. 255.

