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Reactions by the British Government and Opposition Political Parties to the Report of the New Ireland Forum.

1. British Government

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Mr. James Prior, MP., speaking after the publication of the Forum Report on 2 May, 1984, promised, by way of a preliminary response, careful study both of the Report's proposals and reaction to them. In his statement (which was issued with the approval of the British P.M.,) Mr. Prior welcomed the Report's, "important positive elements", of which he listed three:

1. The rejection of violence;
2. The recognition that unity in Ireland, if it ever comes about, will need to be freely agreed and negotiated by the people of the North and the South, and
3. The "considered attempt" made by the four constitutional nationalist parties to agree a report that recognised and respected the position of the Ulster Unionist parties.

In a BBC Radio interview on 6 May, 1984, the British Prime Minister delivered a "mixed verdict" on the Forum Report, describing its recommendations as "really rather simplistic", but, at the same time, declaring herself ready to look at any new idea. While reiterating the British Government's guarantee to the unionists in Northern Ireland, she stated (positively from the Irish Government's point of view) that the violence in Northern Ireland "can't go on forever" and that "we must find something". Stressing the need to work for a solution and her willingness to look at new approaches, the Prime Minister mentioned that to come to some arrangement which will suit people, it is recognised that "you can't do it just being English or British. There is an Irish aspect to this."

In an interview with George Gale in 'The Daily Express' on 4 June, 1984, the British P.M. said she was prepared to discuss "many, many, things" with the Government, including the Forum Report, but referred rather unfavourably, to the three possible constitutional models set out in the Report as 'to some extent, a takeover, as it would appear to the Ulster Unionists'. The guarantee to the unionists was solidly reaffirmed in the interview.

Interestingly, press reports in the immediate aftermath of the Report's publication, were suggesting that senior members of Mrs. Thatcher's Cabinet, such as Lord Whitelaw and Foreign Secretary, Sir Geoffrey Howe, were pressing for an 'early and substantive' action to endorse a fresh political approach to the Northern Ireland problem, but the reports stressed that the key factor would be Mrs. Thatcher's own perception of any appropriate action to follow. On 20 June, 1984, Mr. Prior accused the Labour Party Leader, Mr. Kinnock, of wishful thinking if he believed there would ever be consent in Northern Ireland for a united Ireland. Mr. Prior was speaking in response to the joint statement issued after a meeting the previous day between Mr. Kinnock and the Tanaiste, Mr. Spring. Mr. Prior went on to state that there would be no new Government initiatives and that "what we need to do is make slow but resolute progress towards a situation in which both communities can live in peace within Northern Ireland."

It has been noted in the press that the British P.M. will not be participating in next month's House of Commons debate on the Forum Report and that, as expected, the principal speaker for the Government will be Mr. Prior.

Press cuttings on the British Government's response to date to the Forum Report and a copy of the text of Lord Lyell's statement in the House of Lords' debate on Northern Ireland on 20 June, 1984, are attached at Tab A.

2. Labour Party

Labour's Northern Ireland spokesman, Mr. Peter Archer, M.P., on publication, welcomed the Forum Report and urged the British Government to join the Irish Government in "discussions with nothing ruled out of the agenda". In a statement on 19 June, 1984, Mr. Archer mentioned that "a solution to the problem of Northern Ireland must come primarily from the people of Northern Ireland...". He pointed to the fact, however, that "if it proves impossible to initiate a constructive discussion in Northern Ireland, we believe that the Governments of the United Kingdom and the Republic should initiate discussions as to how the interests which North and South

have in common can be pursued in common policies". He further stated that "representatives of all groups in Northern Ireland should be invited, but those who decline to attend must not complain of decisions which are taken in their absence".

Significantly, the Labour Party Leader, Mr. Kinnock, expressed his support for the Forum Report by raising the matter in the House of Commons on 3 May and pressing the Government to devote time for a debate on the Report.

The positive and welcoming response by the Labour Party to the Forum's findings on possible approaches to unity and reconciliation in Ireland is in line with their generally positive policy approach to the problem and is in definite contrast to the initial responses of the British Government which were either guarded or lukewarm.

In a joint statement issued after their meeting in London on 19 June, 1984, the Tanaiste and Mr. Kinnock called for a new joint British-Irish initiative which would lead to a united Ireland. The Forum Report was jointly endorsed and the British Government was urged to aim for Irish unity to be achieved peacefully and by consent.

In a press conference afterwards, Mr. Kinnock did not endorse any specific constitutional proposal for a settlement in Ireland, but mentioned that it could take the form of "unity, federation or some other arrangement. Strong emphasis was placed on the role of the two Governments in any moves towards a solution and support was given for joint action in appropriate areas of policy. A higher profile for the activities of the existing committees of the Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Council was also encouraged. Mr. Kinnock also stressed the "immense significance Northern Ireland has for the conduct of British policy and that it is necessary for the Government to give prominence and high priority to attending to it".

Press cuttings on the Labour Party's response to date to the Forum Report, a copy of the texts of the joint statement and of Mr. Archer's statement, both of 19 June, 1984, are all attached at Tab B.

3. SDP/Liberal Alliance

The Joint SDP/Liberal Commission on Northern Ireland issued, in advance of the Forum Report's publication, its initial response on 30 April, 1984, by generally welcoming the Report and stating that the Forum's proposals merit investigation by both Governments and by the peoples of Britain and Northern Ireland. A copy of the Commission's statement is attached at Tab C.

Mr. David Steel, M.P., the Liberal Leader, speaking in Belfast on 17 May, 1984, praised the Forum Report for its "useful recognition for the need for change by consent", although remaining non-committal on its suggested models for constitutional change. He also emphasised the need to establish the parliamentary tier of the AIIC which, he said, would give the AIIC more authority. Obliquely referring to unionist intransigence, he mentioned, crucially, that while the union would remain as long as there was majority consent, no veto on reform, nor on constitutional experiment within the union should be accepted.

On 12 May, 1984, the SDP's Council for Social Democracy which assists in the formulation of party policy, unanimously welcomed the Report of the Forum, calling on "all the political parties to respond constructively to the Report" and recognising it as "a genuine attempt on the part of Irish Nationalists, North and South, to raise the issues in a positive and responsible way".

SDP President, Mrs. Shirley Williams, has also been prominent in her support for the Forum process, having written a favourable article on it in the London Times, a copy of which she sent to the Taoiseach.

Press cuttings on the SDP/Liberal Alliance responses to the Forum Report, copies of the Joint Commission's statement of 30 April, 1984, Mrs. Williams' article and material on the Liberal Party's policy on Northern Ireland, are all attached at Tab C.

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