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Taoiseach's remarks (21 Jan) and statement (22 Jan)  
on the Anglo-Irish Agreement:  
Reaction of Northern Ireland political parties.

1. The Taoiseach's remarks and statement this week in response to comments by Jim Nicholson and Jack Allen published in the "Sunday Press", aroused considerable interest in Northern Ireland. This note summarises the public reactions of the main political parties.

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2. James Molyneaux said on Monday (prior to the issue of the Taoiseach's statement) that he had been "greatly encouraged" by the Taoiseach's remarks on Sunday. He said that "we are moving slowly and cautiously in the right direction and I think most people in Northern Ireland would applaud that sort of thing". He reiterated, however, that the OUP would not enter talks unless the party's conditions were met. He did not comment directly on the Taoiseach's statement of 22 January. However OUP "sources" are quoted in the "Newsletter" of 24 January as calling the present situation "more hopeful than it has been for some time" and were refusing "to see (the Taoiseach's) rejection of a suspension of the Anglo Eire deal as a major setback to hopes of a political breakthrough".
3. Jim Nicholson and Jack Allen themselves appear to have subsequently qualified their comments in the "Sunday Press" interview. As the week progressed both reintroduced suspension (or, in Nicholson's case, "inoperation") of the Agreement as a precondition to talks. Indeed Allen suggested that the "question of power-sharing" was also an "obstacle" to the starting of talks. Nicholson, who told the "Belfast Telegraph" of 23 January that his "Sunday Press" interview "certainly was not designed to create the enthusiasm that happened", felt that the Taoiseach's statement did not "go far enough". He was extremely critical of John Hume's comments since the weekend: "I have to repeat that clearly John Hume wants to continue rubbing

Unionists' noses in the dirt. He wants to live in his little secluded Irish nationalism, without looking at the broad issues which have to be approached if we want to move forward from the present difficulties".

4. Ken Maginnis, while reiterating the party line on suspension, was more positive. In a lengthy interview on Radio Ulster on 23 January he was asked if he would talk to the Taoiseach. He replied that "of course it is something that one must think about because, as part of any solution, we have got to decide how to live at peace with our neighbours and, yes, there will come a time, I am absolutely certain, when somebody will sit and talk to Charlie Haughey". Referring to a possible new Agreement to replace the Anglo-Irish Agreement, he said that it would "be a contract about what happens within Northern Ireland; it will be a contract that re-examines the relationship that broke down in 1985 between London and Belfast .... and, of course, it will be a (a contract about the) relationship between Belfast and Dublin".
5. Later in the week two other senior OUP figures, Party Secretary Jim Wilson and Central Council member Chris McGimpsey also restated the assertion that some form of suspension of the Agreement was necessary before talks could begin. Interestingly, McGimpsey added that "it was a pity that Paisley was not more receptive (to the Taoiseach's remarks) because that would have put John Hume and the SDLP on the spot".

DUP

6. Ian Paisley's reaction to the Taoiseach's statement was hard-line and blunt. He refused the Taoiseach's invitation to talks, describing it as a "gimmick" and adding that "after much hype and window dressing", the statement proved to be no more than a "re-hash of his well known views". In

a further statement subsequently, he said that in calling for suspension of the Agreement and the Secretariat, the Unionist leaders were "voicing the opinion of Ulster people as demonstrated at the ballot-box. There will be no going back on that pledge as far as I am concerned".

7. Peter Robinson struck a significantly different note; while he, too, reiterated the suspension call, he described the Taoiseach's statement as "helpful" (although prefacing this with a comment that "it had been heralded in such a way that we might have expected some more substance in the statement"). He also restated his view that in any negotiations the three sets of relationships (within Northern Ireland, North/South, Ireland and Britain) would have to be taken together - "in my view you have agreed nothing until you have agreed them all and, therefore, its part of a process of bringing them all along together and I don't think you take any of them out of sequence".
8. Sammy Wilson referred to the Taoiseach's remarks and statement as a "milestone"; he said that for the "first time we now have all of the parties who were first involved in the signing of the Agreement saying that it would be desirable to have a replacement, which would bring Unionists into the workings of politics in Northern Ireland and uprating relationships between Northern Ireland and the South".
9. When the interviewer suggested to Wilson that the Irish Government and the SDLP would feel "compromised" were they to agree to a suspension of the agreement, Wilson responded: "I think in the past they've always taken the view that they would compromise their position if they were even to agree to a replacement of the Agreement. Now that doesn't seem any longer to present a problem to them". Pressed as to whether he would talk to the Taoiseach, he said that "we

have always maintained that the internal affairs of Northern Ireland are only our affairs, are nothing to do with the Irish Republic and therefore, from that point of view I'm not so sure there's any purpose in talking to Charlie Haughey at this stage".

SDLP

10. Overall, the SDLP felt that the Taoiseach's intervention had proved very worthwhile in deflecting pressure back on the Unionists and away from the Irish Government and the SDLP. Publicly, John Hume confined himself, prior to the Taoiseach's statement, to questioning Nicholson's and Allen's "authority" in making their comments and reiterated the SDLP's total opposition to any suspension of the Agreement. On Monday he "welcomed" the Taoiseach's statement saying "I think Mr. Haughey wants progress like everybody else does here who has got any sense". Referring to the Unionist calls for suspension of the Agreement, he said: "The Unionists want, before they move at all, the Anglo-Irish Agreement put into cold storage, in advance of which they are not giving any indication or any description of what they have in mind other than to tell us that they want devolution and that it should not be power sharing in any shape or form. I'm a pretty reasonable person I think, but I am not a political idiot!".

Sinn Féin

11. Gerry Adams said that "Mr. Haughey speaks of movement towards a better arrangement which would transcend the existing Agreement. However such a change would only serve to reinforce the present partitionist structure built as it would be on a Stormont administration. Such a position runs counter to his often repeated and correct belief that the North is a failed political and economic entity and to his determined argument in the New Ireland Forum for the option of a unitary state. It also concedes to Unionists a veto

over political progress towards a democratic settlement of the present conflict".

Latest Developments

12. Further developments of note in the last couple of days that may be seen as indirectly linked to the Taoiseach's statement are:

- the joint letter from Molyneaux and Paisley to Mr. Brooke, pressing him for clarification as to how Unionist pre-conditions for talks can be met, and "also the nature of the arrangements which Her Majesty's Government feels would lend to progress"
  
- An interesting Editorial in the "Belfast Newsletter" on 25 January which seemed to hint at some flexibility about suspension of the Agreement as a pre-condition for talks: "To talk about having the Agreement and Maryfield put into abeyance for one, two or three months to allow dialogue to begin is to engage in semantics. But a publicly declared intention to do the right thing by Ulster could provide sufficient evidence of a withering of the Hillsborough Agreement to allow dialogue to begin without sacrifice of principle".

Anglo-Irish Division  
26 January, 1990.