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GOVERNMENT RESPONDS TO UNIONIST PETITION

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Rt Hon Tom King, MP, has today written to the following Unionist politicians, Rt Hon James Molyneaux MP, Reverend Ian Paisley MP, Mr Sammy Wilson, Lord Mayor of Belfast, Mr James Kilfedder MP, Mr Roy Beggs MP, Mr Clifford Forsythe MP, Mr Ken Maginnis MP, Reverend William McCrea MP, Mr Harold McCusker MP, Rt Hon Enoch Powell MP, Mr Peter Robinson MP, Mr William Ross MP, Reverend Martin Smyth MP, Rt Hon John Taylor MP, Mr Cecil Walker MP, giving the Government's response to the petition presented to H.M. The Queen on 12 February, 1987.

Attached is the full text of Mr King's letter.



"As Her Majesty's Private Secretary made clear on 12 February, on receipt of a petition it is the constitutional practice of Her Majesty to cause it to be referred to Her Ministers for attention. It is in accordance with that procedure that your petition of 12 February has, by Her Majesty's command, been referred to me as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. I have given the petition careful consideration, but I cannot recommend to Parliament that a referendum should be held on the Anglo-Irish Agreement.

There have been calls from time to time for a referendum on some particular issue. While clearly individual cases have been considered on their merits, only in very exceptional circumstances has a referendum been held. One of the principal factors that has influenced these decisions is that on general principle it is through Parliament that the will of the people is expressed and decisions of Parliament should not be subject to a separate referendum.

The only exceptions have been on whether Northern Ireland should remain part of the United Kingdom (in the Border Poll in 1973); whether the United Kingdom should remain a member of the European Community (1975); and on the possibility of devolution in



2

Scotland and Wales (1979). In the case of Northern Ireland, there remains statutory provision to the effect that in no event will Northern Ireland or any part of it cease to be a part of the United Kingdom without the consent of the majority of the people of Northern Ireland voting in a further referendum or Border Poll.

Quite apart from other factors, each of these cases concerned change in powers of Ministers and Parliament. Contrary to the impression given in the petition, the Anglo-Irish Agreement has not resulted in any change in my powers as Secretary of State, or in the powers of Parliament in relation to Northern Ireland, and that is why there is no valid comparison with, for example, the devolution proposals for Scotland and Wales, which did involve changes in the powers of Ministers and the role of Parliament. Ministers accountable to Parliament continue to take all Governmental decisions in Northern Ireland, and as Article 2 of the Agreement itself states, there is no derogation from sovereignty.

The petition states that the petitioners are in fear of being deprived of their rights and status as citizens of the United Kingdom. This fear is groundless: the rights and status of the people of Northern Ireland are not changed by the Agreement. The Agreement itself confirms that the status of Northern Ireland would not change except with the freely given consent of a majority of the people of the Province.

The Intergovernmental Conference set up under the Agreement enables representatives of the Irish Government to put forward views and proposals reflecting the interest of the Nationalist community, and we listen carefully to them and do our best to resolve any differences. It is for the benefit of all the people of Northern Ireland that members of the minority as well as the majority should have confidence that their views and interests will be given due weight when Government takes those decisions which, since the Agreement as before, only it can take.



If both communities can be brought to feel that they have a 'real stake in the future of Northern Ireland, I believe that we can make significant progress in defeating terrorism and meeting the social and economic needs of all the people. But such progress is bound to be delayed if the Unionist leadership will not join in a constructive search for it. As the Prime Minister explained to you last year, consultation and not confrontation must be the way to proceed.

Of course the Government realises the concern in the Unionist community about the Agreement. But the way to address that concern must be by dialogue in Northern Ireland and at Westminster on how best to achieve the just, democratic and stable solutions to its problems that Northern Ireland deserves. The Government does wish to discuss with representatives of the Unionist community in Northern Ireland all matters of common concern. I cannot believe that it is in the interest of your constituents that you are not making your views on such matters known to the Government. I therefore hope that we can now start serious discussions about these concerns.

I am writing in the same terms to each of the Members of Parliament who sponsored the petition, and to the Lord Mayor of Belfast; and in view of the public interest, I am placing copies of the letter in the Libraries of both Houses of Parliament, and am releasing its text to the press. I am also sending a copy of this letter to you at the House of Commons."