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Statement by the Minister for Foreign Affairs,

Mr Peter Barry TD

4 July 1984

Embargo: 1.00 p.m., 4 July 1984

I received yesterday afternoon, and have now had an opportunity to study, the full text of the Hansard account of the House of Commons debate on the Report of the New Ireland Forum.

While the Government await the considered reaction of the British Government to the Report, in the meantime I have noted a number of positive features in the debate.

One of the most notable has been that, as a result of the analysis by the Forum of the Northern Ireland problem, much of this debate centred, for the first time in such discussions in the House of Commons, on the problem of providing adequately for the two identities in this island.

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Secondly, much of the remarks of the Secretary of State, Mr Prior, centred on the dangerous problem of alienation that exists within the minority community in Northern Ireland. As Mr Prior said, "they feel no sense of identification with many aspects of Government nor with those whose job it is to uphold law and order in Northern Ireland. They resent the fact that there's so little scope for expression of their Irish identity. They see themselves as excluded from any exercise of political power over the affairs of the Province."

The constitutional nationalists, in the Forum Report, found the courage to acknowledge inadequacies in our own traditional approaches. It is heartening that Mr Prior too has found the courage to make similar acknowledgements. For example, he says "Despite all that in historical terms - some would have said even in modern terms - the Northern Irish have suffered at the hands of the British, they hold out the hand of friendship in a way that would do credit to any other part of the world."

In stressing the requirements that the Irish identity of the minority should be recognised and at developing their participation in all the structures and processes of Northern Ireland, Mr Prior admitted that "There are aspects of our practices and administration which are not sensitive enough to these requirements".

Mr Prior's speech, moreover, contained the first clear acceptance by a British Government that the Irish Government

has a legitimate role in speaking on behalf of the nationalists of Northern Ireland. "We are concerned", he said, "about the views that the Irish Government have expressed on their behalf".

On future action, the Secretary of State recognised that the dangers for Northern Ireland of staying put, of doing nothing, are greater than the obvious risks of seeking to make some political advance, and referred on several occasions to the sense of urgency felt by the British Government in the matter.

In relation to the models contained in the Forum Report, the Secretary of State confined himself to expressing the view that Unionists would not agree to them "inasmuch as any of these models significantly alters the sovereignty of Northern Ireland".

I wish to make it very clear that in our contact with the British Government we shall continue to discuss the Report of the New Ireland Forum in all of its aspects.

I believe that the most important element in Mr Prior's statement is his proposal to hold talks with the constitutional parties in Northern Ireland and with the Irish Government. The Irish Government will, of course, participate fully in such talks.

I am glad that Mr Prior found positive value in the Report of the New Ireland Forum. He particularly welcomed its serious examination of nationalist aspirations, its emphasis on the importance of consent, its unequivocal condemnation of violence, its attempt to understand the Unionist identity and its

openness to discuss other views. I believe that there is now considerable common ground between the two Governments in our analysis of what is wrong in Northern Ireland and that we have developed a good deal of common thinking on what the Forum identified as the Requirements of the situation, those Requirements which constitute the ten proposals of the Forum Report.

In the months ahead the Government will be seeking to build on the positive elements in the Secretary of State's speech, and indeed upon other positive elements in contributions from many speakers, including representatives of Northern unionism. Whether, and to what extent, these discussions will lead to a positive outcome is something which no one can predict at this time, but the debate in the House of Commons has at least signalled that the effort to make such progress is now worthwhile.