

a united Ireland – by political rather than violent means. A former Irish Prime Minister, Albert Reynolds, and the leaders of the nationalist and republican political parties in Northern Ireland – John Hume of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and Gerry Adams of Sinn Fein – told the IRA they believed its aims would never be achieved through violence; that being so they suggested, the IRA should give politics a chance. Separately Loyalists were advised that their aim of ensuring Northern Ireland remained a part of the United Kingdom would best be addressed through talks rather than at the point of a gun.

The belief that negotiation rather than violence now had a better chance of solving the future constitutional status of Northern Ireland, derived from two factors. Weariness with the conflict was one, but more important was the establishment of the principle of consent, to which both Britain and Ireland had previously agreed. Simply stated this principle, proposed in the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 and confirmed in the Downing Street Declaration of 1993, established that if the majority in the north wished to remain a part of the United Kingdom, Ireland would not object, and if the majority there wished to become part of the Republic of Ireland, Britain would not object. Britain's statement that it had no strategic interests in Northern Ireland, and that it would abide by the wish of the majority there as to its constitutional future, and Ireland's stated willingness to abide by a majority vote in the north on unification, caused concern among both traditions. On the republican side because it indicated Ireland's willingness to recognise the partition of 1920, and among unionists because it indicated Britain's preparedness to see the six counties of Ulster become part of the republic. But by establishing the policy of consent the governments cut the ground from under the paramilitary groups' rationale for fighting – since on both sides their members claimed to support democratic principles – and it challenged the accusations of those American critics who continued to object to Britain's role in Northern Ireland. It opened the door to jaw jaw.

The talks proposed by the two governments aimed to address three circumstances. The first was to get agreement among the parties to re-establish in the north, the provincial government that was suspended in 1972 at the beginning of the Troubles, when direct rule from Westminster was imposed. The second was to set up mechanisms between north and south in areas of interest that would benefit both countries, a move that seemed particularly appropriate given that each were members of the