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Removing the Basis of the Historic Conflict? The Downing Street Declaration and the Contested Role of European Integration in the Northern Ireland Peace Process

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Abstract

This article examines the section on European integration in the Joint Declaration by British Prime Minister John Major and his Irish counterpart Taoiseach Albert Reynolds in 1993. The Joint Declaration, also known as the 'Downing Street Declaration', was a pivotal moment in the Northern Ireland peace process. Using archival material and witness interviews, this article tracks the development of the text on Europe over time, revealing a negotiation process between officials and politicians in Dublin and London over the terms in which the European project would be discussed in the declaration. The role envisaged for Europe in bringing peace to Northern Ireland was progressively whittled down during this process, with the final text using vague, functional language, rather than the detailed discussion of the European dimension that is evident in earlier drafts. Whilst Sinn Féin's sceptical attitude to European integration clearly shaped the drafting process, as did concerns about further aggravating unionist sentiment, it was the political potency of Westminster Euroscepticism, especially during debates over the Maastricht Treaty, that ultimately dictated the final form of the wording on Europe in the declaration. Given the well-recognised role the Downing Street Declaration had on establishing the principles enshrined in the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and the subsequent debates over the European Union (EU) dimension of the peace process, which became highly politicised after the 2016 Brexit referendum, this negotiation process in the early 1990s clearly had a profound, if delayed, impact on politics in Northern Ireland, British–Irish and UK–EU relations.

Keywords: European integration; Ireland; Maastricht Treaty; Northern Ireland; peace processes; United Kingdom

Introduction

The Joint Declaration, commonly known as the 'Downing Street Declaration' (DSD), was issued by British Prime Minister John Major and Irish Taoiseach Albert Reynolds on 15 December 1993. In retrospect, it was a pivotal moment in the Northern Ireland peace process, perhaps rivalled only by the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (GFA) in terms of its importance in ending the Troubles. The DSD had the British and Irish heads of government articulate a joint position on the constitutional status of Northern Ireland that skilfully married key tenets of nationalism (those who support Northern Ireland leaving the United Kingdom and joining a united Ireland) and unionism (those who support Northern Ireland continuing in the United Kingdom). This addressed a central hurdle on the road to peace and opened a political avenue for the major paramilitary movements within both traditions (republicanism and loyalism, respectively) to end their armed campaigns and agree to work towards a peaceful constitutional settlement with the UK and

Irish governments. This took some of these issues off the table for the GFA negotiations, increasing their likelihood of success.

The release of state papers from this era and the opening of several private collections related to the negotiations have allowed academics to explore the DSD drafting process. Notably, Coakley and Todd (2020) have conducted extensive interviews with participants, including civil servants and politicians, on how the text emerged over time. More recently, the Writing Peace[1] initiative has made available online a substantial collection of archival material. This collection and the project's accompanying timelines of the negotiations provide hitherto unavailable insights into the drafting process (Williams, 2024), revealing the gradual evolution of critical concepts and phrases that were not only retained in the GFA but continue to shape discourse around the legacy of the conflict (McCrudden, 2024). Drawing on the potential of Writing Peace to conduct thematic analysis, this article explores the issue of 'Europe' and the degree to which questions around common membership of the European Economic Community (EEC), later the European Union (EU), were considered in the drafting of the DSD. The article relies on Writing Peace's DSD collection, which comprises some of Dermot Nally's papers, as well as 31 files from the National Archives of the United Kingdom, selected papers from the archives of Alec Reid and Tomás Ó Fiaich, and outputs from the Hume–Adams talks.[2] The authors have cross-referenced these documents with later recollections of those involved in the drafting process, as captured by Coakley and Todd (2020) in their chapter on the DSD.

A comparison of the language relating to Europe in the successive drafts clearly demonstrates how the substance of references to joint EEC/EU membership was progressively reduced, primarily at the behest of British officials. Though not appreciated at the time, this reduction in the salience of European integration has arguably had long-lasting and profound implications for the politics of Northern Ireland and British–Irish relations. The GFA referred to joint membership of the EU several times but made few explicit commitments and did not directly mention any need for UK and Irish membership. Eighteen years later, the 2016 Brexit referendum and the United Kingdom's subsequent withdrawal from the EU sparked considerable discussion and debate over the role Europe played in the peace process (Gormley-Heenan and Aughey, 2017; Kelly and Tannam, 2022; Lagana, 2020), and the extent to which the United Kingdom's decision to leave the EU broke the letter or spirit of the GFA (Kelly and Tannam, 2023; see also McCord, 2019). The new data on the DSD drafting process are therefore a window into the salience of Europe during the peace process and the political sensitivities of the time. These different understandings of the role European unity could have for fostering closer co-operation and reconciliation on the island of Ireland have left a long and profound legacy.

Whilst this article focuses on the micro-level drafting of text, at its heart is an argument around the primacy of domestic political considerations to that process, specifically with reference to the European language. It argues that the political potency of this section of the DSD was heightened by the Maastricht Treaty coming into force in autumn 1993 and the parliamentary difficulties this posed to Major. Whilst there was undoubtedly an

[1]Writing Peace is part of the Quill Project, a digital humanities project at the University of Oxford.
[2]The full collection is available online at https://www.quillproject.net/m2/library_collection/4 with links to specific documents in the References.

attempt to appease the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) alongside Conservative Eurosceptics, we argue this too was driven by Major's dependence on them in Parliament. The article tracks the gradual dilution of the European dimension of the DSD and suggests that this was ultimately due to the practicalities of governance. It goes on to argue that this limited role for the EU set the scene for the legal and political disagreements that emerged in the late 2010s and early 2020s in the wake of the 2016 Brexit referendum.

The article proceeds in three sections. First, using Writing Peace data, it traces how the European language was incorporated into the DSD, evolving from ambitious to ambiguous. Second, it explores why this language was diluted, considering the Maastricht negotiations, Euroscepticism within republicanism and the Conservative Party, unionist concerns about the potential role of European integration in facilitating a united Ireland and the priority placed by the Irish government on securing agreement on what they regarded as the core of the declaration. Third, it assesses the long-term implications of the final European wording for the GFA and Brexit-era constitutional disputes: the watering down of the European dimension during the DSD negotiations has had the effect of ensuring the commitments to the EU in subsequent negotiations (including the GFA) remained ambiguous.

I. The Evolution of the European Wording in the DSD

The DSD is seen in retrospect as a crucial moment in the Northern Ireland peace process, signalling to unionists and nationalists alike that the Dublin and London governments could agree on an accommodation on the Irish constitutional question that would satisfy both sides (McBride, 2023). In the years after the Declaration, the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) and loyalist paramilitary organisations declared ceasefires, and political talks began in earnest, culminating in the GFA, widely credited with ending the conflict known as the Troubles, which had claimed the lives of over 3500 over a 30-year period (McKittrick et al., 2004; McKittrick and McVea, 2012).

The origins of the DSD lie at the confluence of overlapping initiatives and backchannel negotiations. These included secret talks between moderate Irish nationalist politician John Hume [the leader of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP)] and his counterpart in Sinn Féin, the political party long associated with the IRA, Gerry Adams; position papers exchanged by the SDLP and Sinn Féin and subsequently published in 1988; proposals by Father Alec Reid CSsR and Father Raymond Murray; and dialogue between Adams and Martin Mansergh (special advisor to successive Taoisigh), mediated by Reid (Mallie and McKittrick, 1996, pp. 65–91; Moloney, 2002; Ó Dochartaigh, 2021). The objective of these initiatives was to enable an IRA ceasefire and thereby a political pathway for the republican movement. They included, with varying degrees of emphasis, establishing an all-Ireland Convention, reaching an agreed position on the exercise of Irish self-determination and a possible British government statement in support of eventual Irish unity. Such a statement would vindicate Hume's position that the armed campaign erroneously focused on the British presence in Ireland when the fundamental obstacle to Irish unity was the unionist population of Northern Ireland[3] and the British government

[3]'… the present British government has made clear in an internationally-binding agreement that if such agreement on the exercise of self-determination took the form of Irish unity that they would, in fact, endorse it. Is that not the clearest possible challenge to the nationalist/republican tradition in Ireland to begin the task of building a new Ireland with our unionist fellow citizens.' (Hume, 1988).

might even be enlisted as 'persuaders' (Reid, 1989, p. 5). A partial breakthrough from Hume's perspective came in Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Peter Brooke's statement in the 'Whitbread' speech in November 1990 that Britain had 'no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland' (Brooke, 1990, p. 11). Shared with the IRA in advance through a backchannel (Sinn Féin, 1994, p. 1), this signalled the government's engagement with Hume's reports of his dialogue with Adams.

The DSD had John Major repeat this statement and Albert Reynolds announce his intention of establishing a Forum for Peace and Reconciliation. However, its key intervention was to craft language that would reconcile two principles historically held in opposition: the right to Irish national self-determination – a core nationalist demand – and the principle that the Union would not be dissolved as long as a majority of the people in Northern Ireland supported it. Where the Whitbread speech affirmed that the 'status of Northern Ireland can only be determined by the people of Northern Ireland themselves', the DSD acknowledged the 'right' of the 'people of the island of Ireland' to 'self-determination on the basis of consent, freely and concurrently given'. In turn, Albert Reynolds conceded that 'it would be wrong to attempt to impose a united Ireland, in the absence of the freely given consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland' (DSD, 1993). This formulation would eventually be realised in practice by the simultaneous 1998 referendums.

The EEC had taken an interest in Northern Ireland at various points including the European Parliament's Haagerup Report (1984), expressing support for the Anglo-Irish Agreement (1985) and generous structural funding from early 1990 (Lagana, 2020, pp. 75–103, 133–158). Yet there is no mention of the EEC in the Whitbread speech and no evidence that European (or other international) parties were directly consulted on the textual drafting.[4] Similarly, European references are rare in the exchanges between Sinn Féin and the SDLP in 1988 and in proposals made by Father Alec Reid and his interlocutors. However, by the time the earliest drafts of the DSD are sketched out, the European dimension is said to 'fundamentally change[s] the nature of British/Irish relationships' (Hume, 1991). Subsequent drafts show a back-and-forth over the terms to express the European dimension of the UK–Ireland relationship, until the expansive language of the first draft, highlighting Ireland's unique geographical position within the EU and the 'effective removal of all borders', is reduced to a cautious reference to a common external context.

This section examines how the European references in the DSD were first included and then diluted. By comparing the text of more than 30 drafts of the DSD available in Writing Peace (Harris, 2025), we have identified 10 different versions of the language on Europe. For ease of reference, we have indicated how these correspond to those published by Coakley and Todd (2020) and Mallie and McKittrick (1996), as well as to the British numbering system.[5]

The first version of the language on Europe appeared in the first recognizable draft of the DSD (JD1):

> 2. Recognising that the implementation of the Single Market and the coming into being of European Union with the effective removal of all borders fundamentally changes the

[4]Such consultations have not emerged in archival research to date, but further research is planned by the authors.
[5]The British government numbered the DSD drafts JD1–JD20. However, their system also included a JD12A, JD14A and JD14B, and JD15A–JD15C.

> nature of British/Irish relationships. Further recognising that future developments which leave both parts of Ireland as the only part of the new Europe with no land links with the other regions, will intensify the common ground between both parts of Ireland and intensify the need for maximum co-operation to achieve maximum benefit from European Union.
> 3. Regret, however, that there remains a serious legacy of past relationships – a deeply divided people on the island of Ireland. This is a major concern of both governments and both deeply regret that these are the last remaining such divisions in the new European order.
> […]
> 5. Both governments therefore commit themselves to using the maximum resources to create the atmosphere in which such agreement is made easier. Both governments find it unacceptable that these are the last remaining divisions in a Europe that has already ended many more deep and bitter quarrels. They will, therefore, promote intensive co-operation at all levels in order to strengthen the process of agreement. (Hume, 1991)[6]

This draft is attributed to Hume by Reid and Adams and dated to October 1991 (Adams, 2004, p. 106; Reid, 2000). Hume (1990) saw a crucial role for Europe in establishing new relationships between the British and Irish governments and between Ireland and Northern Ireland: in his mind, 'the new European order' had 'changed the roots and nature of the British–Irish quarrel'. Indeed, Hume had repeatedly stressed the importance of the European dimension for reducing the salience of the border issue (Kelly and Tannam, 2023, p. 2276; Laffan, 2015, p. 157). It is therefore unsurprising that he would weave Europe into three of seven numbered sections, framing its role in characteristically ambitious and forward-thinking terms (Lagana and McLoughlin, 2023). Given his fondness for this theme, effusive references to Europe in the context of the peace process became closely associated with 'Hume-speak' (Hume's use of idealistic repetitive phrases; see, e.g., McBride et al., 2025, e1442961).[7]

The second version of the language on Europe appeared in the next draft of the DSD (JD2), drawn up in October/November 1991[8] by the Irish government in dialogue with Hume:

> They believe the development of closer European unity, which will result in the effective removal of borders, fundamentally changes the nature of British–Irish relationships and removes the basis of the historic conflict still taking place within the confines of Northern Ireland. These developments, and the fact that both parts of Ireland will in the future be the only considerable territory in the Community without land links to the other countries and regions, will intensify the need for both parts of Ireland to be united in their approach to all major issues, which affect the future of all the people of Ireland, North and South, in the context of the new Europe.
> Both the British Prime Minister and the Taoiseach are convinced that the ending of conflict and healing of division can make a huge positive contribution to the future welfare and prosperity of both parts of Ireland, as well as bring to an end the last remaining

[6]This draft corresponds to Mallie and McKittrick's (1996, pp. 118–119) Draft 1; they date it to 6 October 1991. Reprinted as Document 4.3 by Coakley and Todd (2020, p. 299).
[7]The Quill Project employs a reference system of 'jump codes' to reference items. Enter the jump code into the search box to be taken to the relevant entry.
[8]Reid's (2000) letter dates the draft to November 1991; however, Adams and an annotation on the draft itself date it to October.

> divisions in a European Community that has already ended more deep and bitter quarrels. […]
> […]
> Such unity would of course, require institutional recognition of the special links that exist between the peoples of Britain and Ireland as part of the totality of relationships, while taking account of the newly forged links with the rest of Europe. (Joint Declaration: Draft 2, 1991a)[9]

The shift from JD1 to JD2 reflects an important evolution in tone, agency and political framing. Where JD1 used abstract and idealistic language to emphasise the transformative potential of 'European unity' for British–Irish relations, JD2 adopts a more institutional voice and introduces concrete links between European integration and conflict resolution in Northern Ireland. In JD2, Paragraph 2 is directly attributed to the heads of government instead of beginning with the more standard legal phraseology 'recognising that',[10] centring their personal commitment to the statement. Moreover, small changes are made to qualify some of the more expansive claims: 'removal of all borders' becomes 'removal of borders', and 'only part of the new Europe' becomes 'only considerable territory in the Community'.

However, these qualifications are paired with a more radical vision for Europe's role in shaping new relationships. The utility of European integration for peace is developed further in JD2. Crucially, it reframes 'European unity' as a force capable of 'removing the basis of the historic conflict' in Northern Ireland: a significant escalation in rhetorical ambition. References to 'common ground' and 'co-operation' are replaced with a call for 'both parts of Ireland to be united in their approach to all major issues, which affect the future of all the people of Ireland, North and South, in the context of the new Europe'. This movement from voluntary 'co-operation' to a unified approach reinforces shared Irish interest within the European context. Even though the idea of both parts of Ireland being 'united' is heavily qualified, a potential path from European unity to Irish reunification is hinted at. These changes signal an ambitious attempt to embed nationalist ambitions within the broader framework of European integration in a document that aimed to broker a ceasefire with Sinn Féin.

The third version of the language on Europe comes from the next draft (JD3). This was attributed to Sinn Féin and shared with the British and Irish governments by John Hume in February 1992 (Beeton, 1993a).

> [2.] The development of closer European Unity will intensify the need for Ireland to be united in its approach to all major issues, in the context of Europe and beyond.
> [3.] Both the British Prime Minister and the Taoiseach are convinced that the securing of a comprehensive political settlement, with the consequent ending of conflict and the healing of divisions, can make a huge positive contribution to the future welfare and prosperity of Ireland and its people, as well as bring to an end one of the last remaining divisions in Europe. Both of them recognize that the ending of division can only come about through the agreement and co-operation of the people, north and south, and that the present constitutional arrangements have inhibited the development of this process. […]
> […]

[9]This draft corresponds to Mallie and McKittrick's (1996, pp. 371–373) Draft 2 and to Coakley and Todd's (2020, pp. 300–301) Document 4.4. The latter cite the copy shared with the British government (Joint Declaration: Draft 2, 1991b).
[10]The words 'recognising that/the' may have come directly from the Anglo-Irish Agreement (1985).

> [5.] […] Such structures would of course, require institutional recognition of the special links that exist between the peoples of Britain and Ireland as part of the totality of relationships, while taking account of the newly forged links with the rest of Europe. (Joint Declaration: Draft 3, 1992)[11]

If JD2 made a tentative link between European and Irish unity, JD3 relegates European integration to nothing more than a further justification, and possible mechanism, for achieving a united Ireland. It erases the suggestion that European integration would entail the removal of borders or effect the removal of the historic basis of the conflict. It no longer suggests that Europe might transform relationships between the United Kingdom and Ireland, instead making a more tentative claim about the position of the Northern Ireland conflict in Europe – it is now 'one of the last' rather than 'the last' divisions. This abrupt shift almost certainly reflects Sinn Féin's historic Euroscepticism (Kelly, 2021; Maillot, 2009) but also a developing strategy of using European discourse as leverage for constitutional change. It is characteristic of a wider transition in Sinn Féin publications, away from outright opposition to Europe (An Phoblacht, 1972) to seeing it as a potentially helpful context for Irish unity (An Phoblacht, 1994).

It is worth noting that the reference to Europe in Paragraph 5 would make it into the final draft of the DSD without further amendment.[12] This section may have been uncontested precisely because it frames Europe as a political context rather than an agent of political transformation in Northern Ireland: successive amendments would ensure that this vision of Europe prevailed. This would also be the only language on Europe in the alternative British draft of the Joint Declaration shared first with Molyneaux and then with the Irish in November 1993 (Alternative British Draft Declaration (25 November), 1993).

The fourth version of the language on Europe is the most complicated to date. The earliest draft to include this formulation on Quill is from March 1993 (Joint Declaration: March 1993 Draft, 1993).[13] It also appears in JD6 (Joint Declaration: JD6, 1993), which was handed to Robin Butler at Baldonnel on 6 June 1993 (McBride et al., 2025). However, JD6 was archived alongside a Northern Ireland Office (NIO, 1993) commentary that compares it to JD4 and notes that 'Paragraph 2 on the context provided by "European Union" is also an exact run of JD.4'. We can therefore date this language to 'the version which Mr Hume handed to PUS, NIO [John Chilcot] on 29 April [1992], and which we assumed had emerged from the DFA [Irish Department of Foreign Affairs]' (Beeton, 1993a).

> They consider that the development of European Union fundamentally changes the nature and the context of British–Irish relationships and will progressively remove the basis of the conflict still taking place in Northern Ireland. The challenges and opportunities of European Union will, of themselves, require new approaches to serve interests common to both parts of Ireland. (Joint Declaration: JD6, 1993)

This language marks a notable departure from the more visionary Irish drafts that preceded it. Whilst it retains the idea that European integration 'fundamentally changes'

[11]This draft corresponds to Mallie and McKittrick's (1996, pp. 373–374) Draft 3.
[12]We have consequently not included it in subsequent quotations.
[13]This draft appears to correspond to Mallie and McKittrick's (1996, pp. 378–379) Draft 8, although they only include the text of Paragraph 4, which they date to March 1993. The text corresponds to Coakley and Todd's (2020, pp. 302–304) Document 4.6, which they date to the 19 June 1993. They conflate this with JD6.

British–Irish relationships, it softens this statement by applying it to the 'context' as well as the 'nature' of those relationships. JD4 introduces the word 'progressively' and the future tense to qualify the EU's projected role in the resolution of the conflict, introducing incrementalism in place of earlier determinism. It also abandons the geographical framing of Ireland's uniqueness in Europe (central to JD1 and JD2) along with the explicit link between European integration and the 'removal of borders'.

In their place, new language includes 'challenges' as well as 'opportunities' of the EU. This language returns to JD1's idiom of 'common ground', referring to 'interests [in] common' rather than a 'united' approach. This significantly waters down the implications for North–South political alignment: it is no longer clear whether these 'new approaches' are to be taken by 'both parts of Ireland' or simply by the British and Irish governments.

The fifth version of the language on Europe appears in JD8.[14] This was an Irish government redraft handed to Quentin Thomas by Seán Ó hUiginn on 24 September 1993.

> 2. They consider that the development of the European Community, in which both countries are partners, fundamentally changes the nature and the context of British–Irish relationships and will progressively remove the basis of the historic conflict still taking place in Northern Ireland. The challenges and opportunities of the European Single Market will, of themselves, require new approaches to serve interests common to both parts of Ireland. (Joint Declaration: JD8, 1993)

Whilst JD8 makes only minor amendments to the text of JD4, it continues to dilute the European language. By referring to the United Kingdom and Ireland as 'partners' in the EC, JD8 stresses co-operation without suggesting convergence. Furthermore, the words 'European Union' are replaced with a direct reference to the 'Single Market'. As we will argue below, these shifts are not merely semantic: they strategically de-emphasise the broader political and constitutional implications of European integration in favour of a more neutral, economic framing.

The sixth version of the language on Europe appears in JD10. This was a further Irish government redraft tabled on 6 October 1993 (McBride et al., 2025, s42597).

> 2. They consider that the development of the European Community, in which both countries are partners, provides a broader framework for British–Irish relationships and will be a force for helping to reconcile progressively the historic conflict still taking place in Northern Ireland. The challenges and opportunities of the European Single Market will, of themselves, require new approaches to serve interests common to both parts of Ireland. (Joint Declaration: JD10, 1993)

The evolution from JD8 to JD10 continues to diminish Europe's projected role both in transforming relationships between the United Kingdom and Ireland and in conflict resolution within Northern Ireland. Instead of stating that European integration 'fundamentally changes' British–Irish relations, JD10 describes the EC as providing a 'broader framework' – a more neutral framing. This subtle change inserts a mediating role for Europe rather than casting it as a direct causal agent, thus blunting unionist fears of constitutional coercion through European mechanisms. Overall, these refinements maintain the European theme but in more understated terms.

[14]Because JD7 was a separate proposal by Hume, JD8 followed JD6, the draft that opened negotiations between the two governments in June 1993.

During that same meeting, the draft DSD was amended by both sides, and a significant excision was made to produce the seventh version of the language on Europe. The text that emerged from the meeting was renumbered JD11 by the British government.

> 2. They consider that the development of the European Community will of itself require new approaches to serve interests common to both parts of Ireland. (Joint Declaration: JD11, 1993)

This represents the most significant attenuation of the European dimension of the DSD. Europe is no longer 'a force for helping to reconcile progressively', nor does it 'provide a broader framework for British–Irish relationships'. Rather than positioning Europe as an active agent, helping to resolve the conflict in Northern Ireland and transform the relationships between the key actors, this vague formulation simply acknowledges the shared European context. This reflects the culmination of sustained British pressure to avoid alienating unionist and Eurosceptic audiences, especially in the delicate political climate surrounding the Maastricht Treaty, which is discussed further in Section II. The confluence of a need to avoid inflaming tensions with Conservative Party backbenchers and the mixed audience for pro-European messages in Northern Ireland itself led to the prioritisation of pragmatic functional language over idealistic statements of intent with respect to the utility of the European project to manage constitutional politics on the island of Ireland.

The eighth version of the language on Europe can be dated to 2 November 1993, in a draft somewhere between JD12 and JD13. Attempting to make the DSD more appealing to unionism, the Taoiseach approached Archbishop Robin Eames, who made a series of changes (McBride et al., 2025, s42713). The language on Europe reads as follows:

> 3. They also consider that the development of the European Community will, of itself, require new approaches to serve interests common to both parts of Ireland. (Joint Declaration: As Amended by Robin Eames, 1993)

Whilst no substantial change was made, the relegation of the paragraph to third place reflects its declining importance in the document.

The ninth version of the language on Europe was agreed during a Butler–Nally meeting on 7 December 1993 (McBride et al., 2025, s42601).

> 3. They also consider that the development of Europe will, of itself, require new approaches to serve interests common to both parts of Ireland and to Ireland and the United Kingdom as partners in the European Union. (Joint Declaration: JD15, 1993)

Handwritten amendments by Dermot Nally suggest that various formulations were considered, including returning to 'the development of the European Union' or ending with 'as member states' (Joint Declaration: JD14B as amended for the first time on 7 December 1993, 1993). The introduction of an explicit reference to the two states frames Europe as a backdrop for their evolving relationship rather than as a new forum for the development of the North–South axis.

The 10th version of the language on Europe appears as an annotation to JD15 made by Quentin Thomas.

> 3. They also consider that the development of Europe will, of itself, require new approaches to serve interests common to both parts of the island of Ireland and to Ireland

> and the United Kingdom as partners in the European Union. (Joint Declaration: JD15 as annotated by Quentin Thomas, 1993)

This final addition – a British amendment that was frequently proposed for inclusion in joint government texts – foregrounds the ideal of Ireland as a geographical, as opposed to political, entity. This addition was agreed on 10 December 1993 (McBride et al., 2025, e1443843). No further changes were made to the language on Europe before the DSD was issued on 15 December 1993.

II. The Reasons for Toning Down the European Language

We have previously shown when and how the European dimension of the DSD was toned down; in this section, we go on to explore the reasons behind this. A comparison of successive drafts of the DSD has highlighted two key moments in the development of the language on Europe. It was first watered down over an exchange of drafts between Hume, the Irish government and Sinn Féin – the transition from JD2 to JD4 – before being reframed and condensed during negotiation between British and Irish civil servants, with the most significant excision taking place during a Butler–Nally meeting on 6 October 1993, as JD10 became JD11. By exploring why these changes were made, we will argue that, although the British and Irish drafters shared common basic assumptions about the future of Europe, both sides faced varying degrees of pressure to tone down the language in the declaration. Whilst the earliest Irish government draft reflected their own strong ideological commitment to pro-European sentiment, they were mindful of the primary audience of the DSD (the republican movement – see Thomas, 1993, p. 4) and sensitive to pressure on Major from the Eurosceptic wing of his own party and unionist concerns about European integration becoming a backdoor to a united Ireland. The Irish drafters were thus ultimately ready to sacrifice language specifying European agency in the interests of political expediency and prioritising agreement on other clauses of the document.

The British and Irish governments had shared assumptions around common and continued involvement in the European project. These had been enshrined by earlier British and Irish premiers in the preamble to the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement: 'Wishing further to develop the unique relationship between their peoples and the close co-operation between their countries as friendly neighbours and as partners in the European Community […]' (Anglo-Irish Agreement, 1985, p. 2). Meanwhile, a joint communiqué issued by Major and Haughey after the bilateral meeting in December 1991, where Haughey first raised the possibility of a declaration (McBride et al., 2025, s42532), affirmed the following:

> The Taoiseach and Prime Minister were in agreement as to the benefits of membership of the Community for Ireland and Britain, both economically and in their international relations. They will work for a successful outcome of the European Council in Maastricht next week and for agreement on a Treaty on European Union. (Joint Communiqué, 1991, p. 2)

Speaking privately to Reynolds, Major even noted that the situation in Northern Ireland seemed particularly 'ludicrous' in a European context (Wall, 1992, p. 1). It seems unlikely, then, that either the British or Irish negotiators foresaw the possibility that one of the states would cease to be a member of the 'European Community (EC)'. However, they diverged in the depth of their ideological attachment to the European project and the role they assigned to it in the peace process as an agent of change and model for new institutions.

As demonstrated in our analysis above, the Irish government's earliest intervention into the drafting process simultaneously echoed Hume's vision of Europe as a transformative force in British–Irish and North–South relationships and amplified it by introducing the idea that the EU might remove 'the basis of the historic conflict in Northern Ireland' (Joint Declaration: Draft 2, 1991b). This commitment to European development as a positive force chimed with public statements by the Irish government: Charles Haughey, who was personally involved in the creation of JD2 (Mallie and McKittrick, 1996, p. 371), shared Hume's optimism about the impact of European integration on the Irish question:

> I am increasingly convinced that it is in the context of the new European Union that we will find a solution to the centuries old problem […] in Northern Ireland […] Before the end of the decade all Irish men and women North and South will be fellow citizens of a united Europe. There will be no real border between North and South. (Quoted in Hill, 1991, p. 4)

JD2 was also arguably more radical and ambitious than JD1 in establishing European unity as a framework for Irish unity. This may have represented an attempt to sell the former to the historically Eurosceptic Sinn Féin.

This attempt does not seem to have succeeded. As outlined above, JD3 seizes this opportunity to link European and Irish unity whilst jettisoning the rest of the European dimension. Crucially, JD3 no longer asserts that the EU 'removes the basis of the historic conflict'. Instead, it specifically commits the British government to 'removing the constitutional barriers to peace and reconciliation' (i.e., partition), foregrounding the republican tenet that 'present constitutional arrangements' are the core obstacle to the 'ending of division' (Joint Declaration: Draft 3, 1992). It seems likely, therefore, that Sinn Féin's objection to this aspect of the European language was about crediting anything other than British withdrawal and the end of partition with 'remov[ing] the historic basis of the conflict'.

In their next draft, JD4, the Irish government reinstated Europe's role in transforming UK–Ireland relationships and effecting conflict resolution in Northern Ireland, albeit in more understated language, as explored above. JD4 also significantly toned down references to Irish unity, mentioning only 'interests common to both parts of Ireland'. This may have been in response to British pressure: a briefing for Major on JD2 was overwhelmingly negative, concluding from Paragraphs 2 and 3 that 'the references to the ending of division would commit you to the goal of unification' (Wall, 1992, p. 1). The language of JD4 was then repeated in Sinn Féin's subsequent draft (Mallie and McKittrick, 1996, pp. 371–373), indicating that the republican movement had, on this point, accepted the proposed middle ground. This may well have been in response to movement from the Irish government on other paragraphs.

However, when this draft was finally put to the British government with two amendments as JD6 on 6 June 1996, they continued to have doubts about the European dimension. These were succinctly summarised as follows:

> While the EC in particular does provide a helpful context for improving co-operation between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, paragraph 2 makes excessive claims for the impact of further development of European Union on the Northern Ireland problem, and will be read by Unionists as code for agreement between the two Governments that there should ultimately be a united Ireland. The paragraph is also problematic in the Maastricht context. (NIO, 1993, pp. 2–3)

This ambivalent stance towards language on European integration – at once recognising the potential value of the EC as a forum for enhanced North–South co-operation, whilst being wary of the potential to alienate unionism if such rhetoric was too effusive – had been a consistent British government line to the Irish since the beginnings of the joint declaration initiative. In a Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) briefing prepared for the first summit between Major and Reynolds in February 1992, the 'EC dimension' was described as 'helpful in giving impetus to co-operation' but 'counterproductive with the unionists if it became tagged as a back door to Irish unity' (FCO, 1992, p. 7). A defensive briefing for the meeting went further, making the case that '[a]ny suggestion that the EC will somehow make the border irrelevant, or provide a backdoor route to constitutional change, risks aggravating Unionist suspicions' (Defensive briefing on Northern Ireland, 1992). These concerns seem to directly address the language of JD2, a copy of which was filed alongside the contextual papers prepared for the meeting.

Broadly speaking, however, this seems to have been a presentational rather than ideological concern. The use of 'tagged' echoes a 1991 British government policy paper on the advantages and disadvantages of the EC for North–South relationships, which highlighted the importance of ensuring that the European dimension did not become 'tagged as an Irish or SDLP idea' by unionism. That paper recommended that British politicians make their own pronouncements on Europe to 'counterbalance' those of the Irish government but also stressed the difficulty of staging these so as to reassure rather than provoke unionist opinion. We might conclude then that the British government would have been particularly wary of expressing forward-thinking views on Europe in a document designed to appeal to Irish nationalism, which they knew would be outright condemned by Ian Paisley[15] (Corthorn, 2022) and solicit, at best, a 'non-expostulation' from Jim Molyneaux[16] (McBride et al., 2025, e1444577). It is difficult to determine how valid such concerns, performative or not, may have been, because the earliest draft of the DSD Molyneaux was shown included the anodyne European language of JD11. However, he never mentioned Europe as he reviewed successive drafts (McBride et al., 2025, T4383 and T4396).

In interactions between Irish and British civil servants in 1993, it was the context of the Treaty on European Union, known as the 'Maastricht Treaty', rather than anticipation of unionist backlash, which the British repeatedly highlighted as their main sticking point. The Eurosceptic wing of the Conservative Party had already exerted a crucial influence in bringing down Thatcher's government, and Major was waging a fierce battle against his backbenches over the ratification of the treaty. The so-called 'Maastricht rebels' inflicted several parliamentary defeats during this period, as his slim majority was stretched to its limits (see Baker et al., 1994). The fact that this majority was built on votes from UUP Members of Parliament yoked the British government's twin objections together.

In the second meeting of the Butler–Nally group on 14 July 1993, just a week before a crucial Parliamentary vote on the Treaty, Butler objected that 'the emphasis on European

[15]Leader of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP).
[16]Leader of the UUP.

union (paragraph 2) was tactless towards the "Eurosceptics"' (McBride et al., 2025, e1442792). By way of concession, Mansergh (1993) suggested that 'European integration' and 'the European Single Market' could be used instead: the next draft (JD8) settled on 'EC' and 'European Single Market'.

This did not go far enough. During a meeting between Quentin Thomas and Seán Ó hUiginn, two of the key drafters, Thomas 'registered the sensitivity of paragraph 2 with its attempt to link British/Irish relationships to the EC', asked whether this 'simply reflect[ed] a particular pre-occupation of Mr Hume' and suggested that it could cause 'real difficulty' (McBride et al., 2025, e1443582).

Ó hUiginn agreed to consider the possibility of deleting the paragraph, but instead the Irish government made one final attempt to produce language acceptable to the British, demonstrating their own deep commitment to the European dimension of the DSD. As he tabled JD10, Nally explicitly noted that the reference to the EC had been 'softened' to meet British objections (McBride et al., 2025, e1442957). Nevertheless, Butler once again suggested that it might be merely 'Hume-speak' and asked that it be 'reviewed, since its sensitivity in terms of the current debate in Westminster was evident to all' (McBride et al., 2025, e1442961). It was during this meeting, on 6 October 1993, that the most significant excision was finally made.

It is perhaps not coincidental that the textual changes at this meeting were also in the context of Hume's joint statement with Adams, which had discomfited both governments (Nally, 1993; Thomas, 1993, pp. 1–3). In the immediate aftermath of the statement and during Hume's absence in the United States, there was a narrow window of opportunity for the governments to respond with their own joint statement. This resulted in significant, short-lived engagement on both sides (Beeton, 1993b). Because the Irish government's analysis was that the biggest stumbling block for the British was 'parliamentary arithmetic' (Cooke, 1993, p. 2), they may have been inclined to make a fresh concession. Hume's distance from the process after this point (BBC, 1993) would have left the amendment unchallenged in the protracted negotiations that followed.

Ultimately, the absence of explicit language on Europe in the DSD owes a great deal to historical contingency and the finely balanced numbers in the Westminster Parliament at the time. Ambitious language on European integration was only begrudgingly accepted by Sinn Féin, was inopportune for the British government and may have risked alienating unionism. The Irish government's goal, as the primary driver of the project, was to persuade the British government to make a historic concession aimed at securing an IRA ceasefire, without inflaming unionist opinion any more than was inevitable. Overly assertive European language could have pushed Major out of the process without advancing relations with militant republicanism. It therefore made sense for the Irish government to sacrifice a concept that was clearly ideologically important to them and to Hume in the name of political expediency. The resulting ambiguity, acknowledging the European context without conceding European agency, was underpinned by the assumption that the EU dimension was fixed and could be relied upon (see below) without making it explicit in the DSD.

However, as we will argue, this omission would have unforeseen consequences for the drafting of the GFA, which drew on concepts established in the DSD.

III. The Significance of Europe Being Toned Down for Contemporary Politics

The DSD is seen in retrospect as a key stepping stone towards the GFA, which, amongst other things, established political institutions across three 'strands' of relations (within Northern Ireland, across the island of Ireland, and between the United Kingdom and Ireland); provided constitutional guarantees to both unionists and nationalists; removed the Irish state's irredentist claim over Northern Ireland; committed the UK government to 'rigorous impartiality' in its administration of Northern Ireland; released paramilitary prisoners in exchange for decommissioning and disbandment of their networks; and committed all parties to strict civil and human rights regimes. As such, the GFA is widely viewed as having effectively ended the Troubles (Coakley and Todd, 2020; O'Connell et al., 2023; Renwick and Kelly, 2023).

The approach taken in the DSD, where the EU is explicitly mentioned but in broad and fairly benign language rather than specific or aspirational terms, set the tenor for the EU's role in the peace process. The Frameworks for the Future (Joint Frameworks) documents agreed by the two governments in 1995 do include references to the EC/EU, particularly in terms of cross-border co-operation (Kennedy, 2000; Murphy, 2014; Teague, 1996). The EU was then mentioned directly in six clauses of the 1998 Agreement in three different sections: the North–South Ministerial Council arrangements, the British–Irish Council arrangements and the opening preamble of the British–Irish Agreement. On the North/South and British/Irish forums (Strands 2 and 3), the Agreement states that co-operation on EU policy areas and programmes are areas where the new institutions can have an impact on fostering closer relations. Though it is significant that the European dimension to co-operation is included in the 1998 Agreement at all, these direct mentions of the EU are pedestrian in their language, discussing the establishment of institutions and their competencies, rather than creating any clear and direct commitment to both states being members of the European project. It is only the EU's appearance in the British–Irish Agreement section that expands on how the governments saw the EU's wider role:

> Wishing to develop still further the unique relationship between their peoples and the close co-operation between their countries as friendly neighbours and as partners in the European Union. (Belfast Agreement, 1998, p. 27)

Though the 1998 Agreement has several sections that are directly prescriptive in terms of other institutions to be established and steps to be taken by each government (including for the United Kingdom to incorporate the European Convention on Human Rights into domestic legislation), there is no equivalent section for continued membership of the EU. Nothing in the text explicitly commits either government to membership or to the maintenance of the single market and an open land border. However, it has been said in retrospect that continued joint membership was universally 'assumed' by the negotiators in 1998 (Ahern, 2019; Green, 2021; House of Lords, 2017; Sargeant, 2017). Indeed, in a private meeting between Tony Blair and Sinn Féin in March 1998, Blair said, 'If we looked 50 years into the future, people in Europe would be gradually coming closer together, and things which had seemed of fundamental historical importance would seem less relevant' (Holmes, 1998, p. 5).

A full exploration of the negotiation of the European dimension in the GFA is beyond the scope of this article, but it is a reasonable assumption that the restrained tensions over

the extent to which the EU dimension to peace would be emphasised remained during negotiations throughout the 1990s. Although by the time the GFA was being drafted, Eurosceptic sensitivities were no longer an issue for the Blair government, which succeeded Major's, the latent concerns in 1993 about unnecessarily antagonising unionism came to the fore. Ambitious rhetoric on the opportunities offered by European integration had only become further associated with 'Hume-speak' in the interim. This was intensified by the tendency of both Hume and the Irish government to conceive of North–South arrangements by analogy with EU institutions and to talk about North–South arrangements on a European model – a conflation foreseen in some of the more sceptical British papers of 1991 (Hill, 1991). There was also a clear route whereby language from the foundational DSD was carried into other joint governmental initiatives and from there into the GFA. In that sense, the wording adopted in 1993, where Europe was mentioned and praised for its role in bringing the two islands closer together, set the scene for how it would be treated in the 1998 Agreement: a forum for co-operation across the North–South and British–Irish strands, but nothing more, lest it set off unionist or other sensitivities.

This carried on into the 21st century, and for 18 years after the 1998 Agreement, the European dimension remained an understated but successful element of the peace process (Kelly and Tannam, 2023; Lagana, 2020, pp. 159–184), not least through facilitating an open land border after the security border was removed as the Troubles ended. Later, from 2016 on, it has been argued that the Brexit referendum campaign did not pay sufficient attention to, or indeed actively underplayed, the threats the United Kingdom leaving the EU would pose to the GFA (House of Lords, 2017; Morris, 2021). Some notable exceptions to this included interventions during the referendum campaign by the former President of Ireland Mary McAleese, as well as by former British Prime Ministers John Major and Tony Blair, drawing on their direct experience of the peace process (O'Carroll and McDonald, 2016; Stewart, 2016). In that referendum, Northern Ireland voted comfortably for Remain (56%), whilst the United Kingdom as a whole voted to Leave. What was particularly problematic was the fact that the nationalist community in Northern Ireland was overwhelmingly in favour of staying within the EU (around 88%), whilst unionism was in favour of leaving, albeit less emphatically (around 66%) (Garry, 2017).

Political representatives of nationalism as well as other pro-Remain figures in Northern Ireland and beyond warned of a threat to the 1998 Agreement's cross-border arrangements and the undermining of the EU's role in delivering peace, including through the various funding initiatives Northern Ireland had benefited from. There were fears that a return to customs checks on the island of Ireland could undermine the peace process and cross-border trade (Hayward, 2018). Several leading politicians joined a court case arguing that Brexit was a violation of the 1998 Agreement, though this was ultimately dismissed (BBC, 2016; McCord, 2016). In the weeks and months after the referendum, to assuage these fears, the Irish government, British government and EU made repeated statements that committed all parties to finding a resolution to the Irish border problem that protected the 1998 Agreement after the United Kingdom's departure from the EU (European Council, 2017; May and Kenny, 2016). The European Council, at the behest of the Irish government, also clarified that if a united Ireland were to come about in the future, it would inherit Ireland's existing EU membership (Kenny, 2017).

Notwithstanding the absence of strong EU references in the 1998 Agreement and occasional pushback from some British politicians, the Irish government successfully framed the peace process and the Single Market as effectively intrinsically linked in the aftermath of the 2016 referendum. Therefore, the absence of customs and regulatory checks was accepted as essential to the peace process during the withdrawal negotiations (Dooley, 2022). It is beyond the scope of this article to comment at any length on the border issue during the Brexit negotiations (for more, see Barnier, 2022; Kelly and Tannam, 2023; Russell and James, 2023), but ultimately, the desire to avoid a 'hard border' or customs checks on the Irish land border was resolved via the Northern Ireland Protocol element of the UK–EU Withdrawal Agreement (2020). This moved the focal point of trade checks from the Irish land border to the Irish Sea, between Northern Ireland and Great Britain, and therefore within the United Kingdom. At this point, political unionism and some business groups in Northern Ireland protested against the effect this would have on the United Kingdom's internal market and argued that the Protocol was a breach of the principle of consent aspects of the 1998 Agreement (also set out in the DSD), in a manner reminiscent of nationalism's legal arguments at the start of the withdrawal negotiations (Colton, 2021). As with the earlier cases, this particular line of argument from unionism was rejected by the courts, but their concerns, including those related to the GFA, drove all parties back to the negotiation table, resulting in the Windsor Framework (2023), which alleviated the need for some checks on goods under the Protocol.

In short, it can be argued that the decision to water down the original drafts of the DSD in 1993 set a precedent for a complacent and imprecise position in relation to the EU in later parts of the peace process, including during the negotiations leading to the GFA and the implementation of that agreement in the decades after. The fact that explicit language on the European dimension was not included in the DSD lowered the chances of anything resembling direct commitments to the European project ending up in the 1998 Agreement.

Later, the 2016 decision of the United Kingdom to leave the EU and the subsequent negotiations that sought to deliver that outcome placed Northern Ireland at the heart of fraught debate over where customs barriers would be placed and the future position of the EU in Northern Ireland's politics. In a remarkable historical parallel to her predecessor John Major, the prime minister responsible for implementing Brexit, Theresa May, found herself governing with a slim parliamentary majority and needing to appease Eurosceptic Tory backbenchers and Northern Ireland unionists drafted in to support the government (this time, the DUP). Mutually exclusive arguments were advanced by different sides regarding the degree to which Brexit or its manifestations would undermine the peace process. References to commitments made during the negotiations in the 1990s were advanced by different sides during the Brexit dispute, but an agreed understanding of the role of the EU was not found, due to imprecise formulation in key documents like the DSD and the GFA.

Conclusion

This article has traced the gradual dilution of the European issue in the drafting of the DSD, from progressive and ambitious aspirations to a strategically ambiguous statement.

Evidence suggests that this occurred due to pressures on Major from Eurosceptic backbenchers during the Maastricht debates. Politically weak, Major could not be seen to be threatening the United Kingdom's sovereignty or needlessly alienating the Ulster unionists propping up his minority government. An enduring Euroscepticism within the republican movement, the primary audience for the declaration, made it easier for the Irish government to sacrifice the expression of its own pro-European sentiments in order to extract more strategic concessions from the British, particularly after Hume was distanced from negotiations. The EC/EU itself was not a direct agent in the negotiations, and as we have demonstrated, the decisions made by negotiators from the United Kingdom and Ireland on the issue of how Europe would be framed have had an ongoing impact over the ensuing 30 years, including after Brexit, which disrupted the assumed role of European integration.

At the heart of the European issue and Northern Ireland is a tension between the ambiguity necessary to achieve agreement and the transparency and detail needed for governance. As the Brexit debate fades into the periphery, and UK–Irish and UK–EU relations stabilise, the potential for the European dimension to re-emerge in Northern Ireland politics remains. A referendum on unification is not an immediate prospect, but the campaign for a united Ireland within the EU has intensified, and unionist anxieties over the future of the Union are, at times, clearly evident. Echoing the negotiation process in 1993, there is no publicly agreed understanding of the specific role Europe should play in UK–Irish relations and the future of Northern Ireland.

The Northern Ireland example is relevant to broader peace processes in showing how ostensibly peripheral political pressures, from Sinn Féin's lingering Euroscepticism to Major's parliamentary arithmetic, shape the framing, substance and ambitions of peace initiatives. This article highlights the value of tracing how such pressures filter into the micro-level drafting and become part of the complex process of achieving compromise. These lessons may have relevance for other conflict situations internationally as negotiators walk the tightrope between political expediency in the present and safeguarding the long-term future of agreements.

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Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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