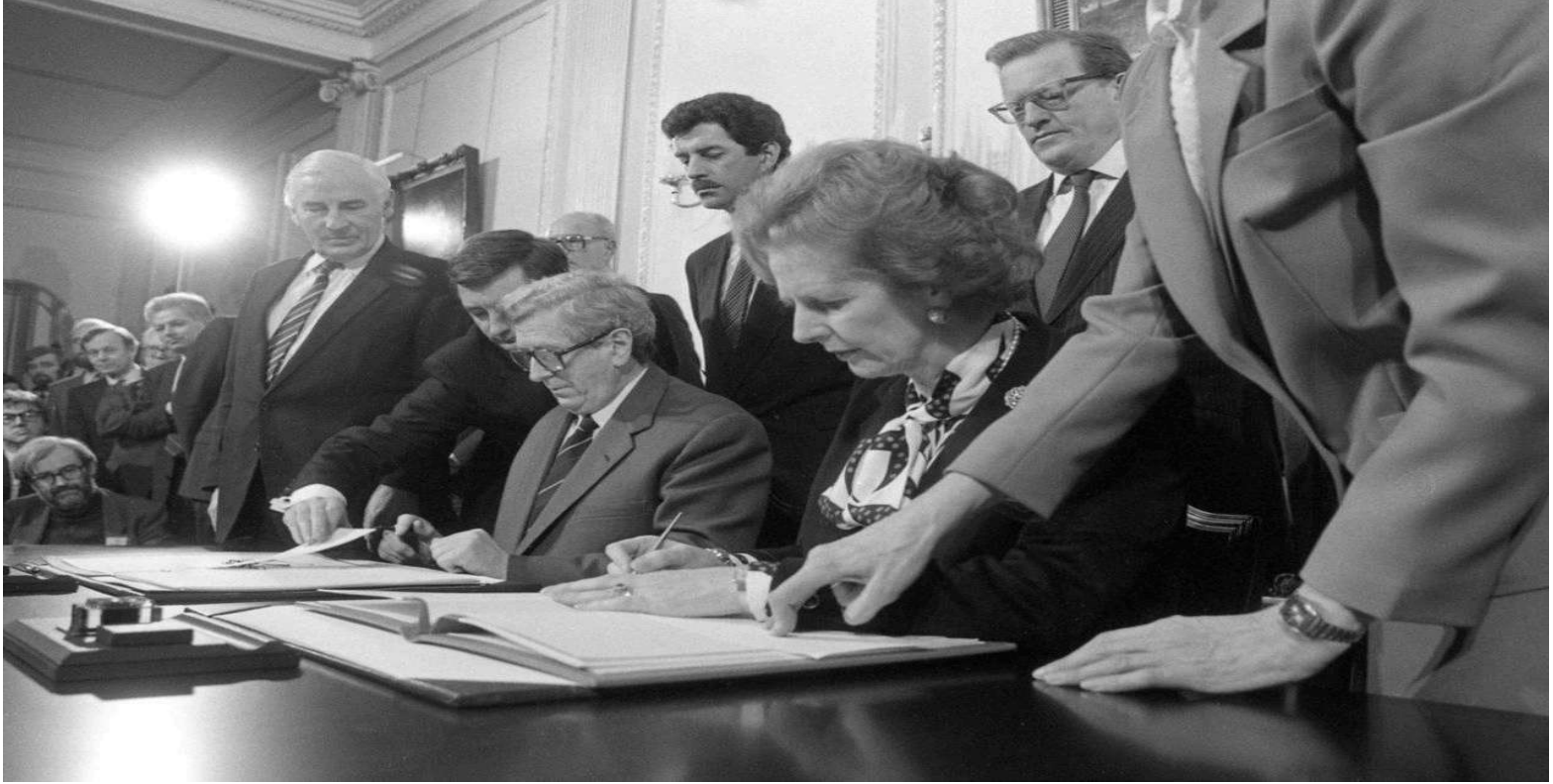


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Flashback 1985: The signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement

This weekend 30 years ago, Garret FitzGerald and Margaret Thatcher signed the historic Anglo-Irish Agreement in Hillsborough, Co Down



An Taoiseach Dr Garret FitzGerald and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher signing the Anglo-Irish Agreement on November 15 1985. Photo: Matt Walsh

Ger Siggins

Sun 15 Nov 2015 at 02:30



It will be 30 years ago tomorrow since Taoiseach Garret FitzGerald and British prime minister Margaret Thatcher jointly signed the Anglo-Irish Agreement. The deal is now seen as an important step on the road

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to the Good Friday Agreement and lasting peace in Northern Ireland.

The scene was the pretty Co Down village of Hillsborough and its castle, which is the home of the Secretary of State and where royals stay on visits to the North.

The agreement grew out of Dr FitzGerald's New Ireland Forum, which was backed by the majority of nationalist opinion but its three options for future government of the North were rejected famously as being "Out! Out! Out!" by Mrs Thatcher. Even with that set-back, talks went on between the governments and a deal was struck in November 1985.

On a cold Friday morning, Mrs Thatcher flew by helicopter into the castle grounds and later met Dr FitzGerald. The pair had some time to wait before the arrival of the media, which the prime minister spent rearranging flowers and enlisting the Taoiseach and her minister Geoffrey Howe to help in moving the furniture about. She even checked out the painting that hung behind the signing table to make sure it had no political connotations. She was reportedly pleased it was merely an 18th-century view of Windsor Castle.

With his documents bound in a green folder, and hers in red, Dr FitzGerald and Mrs Thatcher signed the historic agreement and spoke to the media. The Taoiseach pointed out that it enshrined equal respect for both unionist and nationalist, while the prime minister explained that Northern Ireland would remain in the UK for as long as a majority of its citizens wished it to.

Reaction was swift, and angry. The agreement "will not bring peace, but a sword" said UUP leader James Molyneaux, while Rev Ian Paisley laid it out at a huge rally at Belfast City Hall: "Where do the terrorists operate from? From the Irish Republic! That's where they come from! Where do the terrorists return to for sanctuary? To the Irish Republic! And yet Mrs Thatcher tells us that that Republic must have some say in our Province. We say never, never, never, never!"

Sinn Féin and Fianna Fáil were unhappy, too, as the agreement confirmed Northern Ireland's status as part of the UK.

The Dáil passed the deal by 88-75, while the House of Commons backed it by 473-47, the biggest majority of the Thatcher era. One of the 47 MPs to oppose the deal was future Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, who said: "We believe that the agreement strengthens rather than weakens the border between the six and the 26 counties, and those of us who wish to see a United Ireland oppose the agreement for that reason."

The deal set up the Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Conference in which officials met to promote co-operation in political, legal and security affairs, and set up a permanent secretariat in the Belfast suburb of Maryfield.

John Hume was convinced the Hillsborough signing led to the lasting peace, writing: "Though no one among us felt it was the final solution, the Agreement was a major achievement of democratic politics, and was a significant step forward on the road to lasting peace and stability... Everything that has happened in

the past few years stems from the Agreement."

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