

25 June 99

STATEMENT BY THE GROUP OF 7

It is vital that current efforts to break the political impasse should succeed. Failure would dash the hopes of the great majority who looked forward to a new era of responsible self-government capable of delivering stability, economic growth and an inclusive society in which all might feel themselves to be valued stakeholders.

On 10 February last, we issued a Statement reflecting our view that a solution to the impasse required simultaneous action on twin, but separate, tracks. Along one track was the establishment of an Executive involving all those participants who affirmed the Pledge of Office. Along the other was the voluntary commencement of decommissioning by paramilitary organisations, republican and loyalist. We also invited the parties not simply to conduct a dialogue with each other but to look outward towards the community and to respond to the clearly expressed wishes for the full implementation of the Good Friday Agreement.

Such a solution anticipated the later suggestion that both sides should 'jump together'. Our own proposal suggested what the jump in each case should be but there are no doubt other alternatives.

It is always wise to look before you leap but the looking has lasted long enough. We would earnestly urge the parties to make the simultaneous leap forward now in whatever way they can mutually agree and thereby enable us, as a community, to prove ourselves equal to the opportunity created by the Agreement.

If the politicians reach agreement over the next few days, we can all be certain of one thing. The outcome is unlikely to be the best possible solution in the best of all possible worlds. But, given the dedicated effort which has been put into the process over many months, it will be the best solution possible in difficult circumstances. The new world will be built through the patient accumulation of partial successes. All who welcomed the success of the political parties in concluding the Good Friday Agreement 15 months ago against all the odds should also welcome an outcome which enables its implementation.

We believe that the present uncertainty is conducive to instability and is highly detrimental to Northern Ireland's economic prospects. Others are moving ahead strongly, while we are stuck in a political rut. Unless we get out of it and unless we can get to grips urgently with highly damaging issues like Drumcree, we shall undoubtedly pay the price in terms of jobs, public services, standard of living and quality of life.

Heavily involved as we are in its economic life, we are acutely aware that, without stability, Northern Ireland will not be taken seriously as an economic player. We shall lose out badly on inward investment and the local economy will lack the dynamic thrust displayed by other locations which are not distracted by community unrest and by all the effort which has to be put into getting to the political starting gate here. Until we rectify our situation, we shall never realise our economic potential and everyone will suffer as a consequence. In the rest of the United Kingdom, the territories and regions are becoming increasingly assertive. Failure now will mean that we will be at a disadvantage, with no distinctive voice. We will have lost the ability to shape our own future.

If, sadly, no agreement is reached by 30 June, it will be important that the alternative way forward is swiftly clarified by the Governments so that we do not linger indefinitely in a state of suspended animation.

It would be a tragedy if a society with such potential were to fritter away its chances and sell itself short. The world would find it incredible that a community which had proved so resilient in face of adversity had balked at the challenge of inventing a new future.