

HOUSE OF COMMONS STATEMENT

1. With permission, Madam Speaker, I shall make a statement on the current situation in Northern Ireland.

2. I first pay tribute to the way in which the new institutions have got on with their challenging tasks in the last two months. The Assembly, the Executive, the North South bodies and the British-Irish Council are all now up and running as intended under the Good Friday Agreement.

3. I pay particular tribute to each of the Ministers in the new devolved Executive, and their parties, who have taken up their new responsibilities in good faith, with good will towards each other and a genuine determination to serve all the people of Northern Ireland. I believe this augurs well for the long term success of devolved government in Northern Ireland.

4. Late on Monday the latest report of the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning was delivered to the British and Irish Governments.

5. I pay tribute to the patient efforts of the Commission members, General John de Chastelain, Ambassador Andrew Sens and Brigadier Tauno Nieminen, over recent months - indeed years - and their readiness to continue those efforts to secure decommissioning as intended under the Good Friday Agreement.

6. With the appointment of contact persons by the IRA and UFF in December 1999, all the main paramilitary groups on cease-fire are now engaged with the Commission, a significant advance. The Commission's report points to a number of other positive factors. The cease-fires remain in place. The fact that the guns are silent and the unequivocal support of the IRA and the other paramilitary groups for the political process has played a vital part in recent political advances. The assurance, repeated this week, that there is no threat to the peace process from the IRA is important and will be welcomed.

7. However, the report also stated that there has not yet been any decommissioning of arms by a major paramilitary group. This is totally unacceptable. Notably in the case of the IRA, it has to be clear that decommissioning is going to happen. The Commission believe that their conclusion, in their report of 10 December, that recent events gave the basis for an assessment that decommissioning will happen remains well founded. But they

need further evidence to substantiate that conclusion. In particular, they need definite information about when decommissioning will actually start.

8. Over the last few days both I and my Rt Hon Friend the Prime Minister have had intensive discussions with the Irish Government and the main parties. Even as I speak, these continue. The Decommissioning body has been kept closely in touch with those discussions and they have informed me that they are ready at any time to report further in the event of concrete results from those discussions.

9. Even at this very late stage, it is right that we and all the parties continue to see if there is a basis on which the institutions can continue to operate and decommissioning start. The institutions can only work on the basis of cross-community confidence. Without clarity over decommissioning I have no doubt that this confidence will ebb quickly. All the parties must have certainty that all aspects of the Good Friday Agreement are being implemented, without some being forgotten or overlooked.

10. I believe that it is possible that a way out of the current difficulties may be found at this late stage. But if it becomes clear that because of the loss of confidence the institutions cannot be sustained the Government has to be ready to put a hold the operation of the institutions. Nobody committed to the peace process will relish this prospect. But our purpose if it comes to this will be to preserve them from collapse and to create the time and space in which to rebuild the confidence required to sustain them.

11. I shall therefore publish a Bill tomorrow to enable us to institute such a pause should one prove necessary despite our best efforts.

12. This can only happen if the current unsatisfactory state of affairs changes clearly for the better.

13. We shall invite the House to consider the Bill early next week, with a view to Royal Assent later in the week unless events between now and then clearly make this unnecessary. In the meantime we shall re-double our efforts, with the Irish Government and the main parties, to resolve the present difficulties.

14. Even at this very late stage, I believe it remains possible to rebuild confidence in the institutions, to enable devolution and the other institutions to continue and to ensure that decommissioning starts. But, I stress, these three things are inter-dependent. We cannot partially implement the Good Friday Agreement. It is all or nothing.