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Joint Statement with Bertie Ahern

26 January 2006

Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern met today to consider the way ahead in relation to Northern Ireland. process in Northern Ireland.

PM under "no illusions" about Northern Ireland challenge

Read the statement in full

We met today to consider the way ahead in relation to Northern Ireland.

Since the Agreement there has been, and continues to be, very significant progress in Northern Ireland - a period of unprecedented peace, prosperity and growth. Along with those opportunities, however, Northern Ireland also faces a number of significant economic and social challenges. It cannot afford either complacency or prolonged stalemate.

We strongly believe, therefore, that the interests of everyone in Northern Ireland, and throughout these islands, are best served by the earliest practicable restoration of the devolved institutions.

Decisions that affect the people of Northern Ireland should be taken by locally elected representatives exercising their rights and responsibilities in fully functioning democratic institutions, including the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive, and North/South structures.

2006 is the decisive year for this process. On 6 February talks will begin with the aim of setting out the arrangements and timetable for the restoration of the institutions, which, of course, we want to see as soon as possible.

We recognize, given the previous breakdown in confidence in the process, that this is an ambitious goal. The Independent Monitoring Commission has a key role to play and the Governments look forward to receiving its next report in the coming days, as well as its further report in April.

We also acknowledge the ongoing work of the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning in dealing with the issue of paramilitary weapons.

We believe the parties must also take the necessary steps to allow that trust to be rebuilt - steps that, more than just the passage of time, will rebuild confidence.

This requires that promises made are borne out by actions, and that the strategic decision to commit in a full and verified way to exclusively peaceful and democratic means is being reflected in reality, whatever the practical difficulties involved after such a long period of conflict.

But trust and confidence also requires the parties to take an active role by discussing the issues affecting the future of Northern Ireland together. The Governments believe that now is the time for the parties to engage in that collective discussion.

It is also essential that through dialogue and engagement progress is made in extending active support across all sections of the community for the new policing arrangements throughout Northern Ireland so that no individual or community is denied their rightful access to police protection.

So, too, all those involved in the issues of parades need to join together to ensure that the annual disputes associated with the marching season become a thing of the past.

In that context, both governments will respond positively to those seeking genuine efforts at transformation within loyalism. In particular, we call on those with influence to help bring loyalist paramilitary and criminal activity to an end, and to encourage the full de-commissioning of loyalist weapons. As we move towards devolved Government, we are determined that the process must leave nobody behind.

We are conscious of the responsibilities that the Governments bear. We are fully prepared to exercise those responsibilities. However we are convinced that those best placed to lay the foundations for a prosperous, peaceful and shared future are the political parties

themselves. We encourage them to embrace this challenge, and by doing so this year to complete the transition to peace and prosperity so long desired by the people of Northern Ireland.