

STATEMENT ISSUED BY THE GROUP OF 7

We believe that the Joint Statements of the Governments, the Prime Ministers' subsequent letter to the parties, and the IRA Statement represent a major advance towards a durable peace and political stability. As such, we warmly welcome them. We congratulate the Governments and the party leaders on their vision and tenacity.

If what has emerged from the past 3 months of intensive effort and the current process of clarification does not lead to the restoration of the political institutions this month, their restoration in the foreseeable future seems unlikely. Northern Ireland therefore now has a choice. Which is preferable:

- 1 to seize this significant new opportunity to get the Belfast Agreement implemented in full and, at the same time, to accept the challenge to shape our own destiny; or
- 2 to remain the only part of the United Kingdom whose politicians will exercise no executive authority over its affairs, with little prospect of community reconciliation, and with the issues of arms unresolved?

The political process in any society has a responsibility to provide an environment in which business and all who depend on it for their livelihood – and that means the bulk of the population – can compete effectively in what is now an increasingly global market for trade, investment and technology. We are in no doubt that Option 1, whatever any perceived imperfections and risks, provides a better environment than Option 2.

We speedily need a local Executive which creates a new brand image for Northern Ireland and resumes management of the urgent social and economic issues which it had begun to address so effectively at the turn of the year. We also look forward to the early establishment of the Civic Forum, which was intended to give a formal voice to civil society.

We urge all who are concerned for Northern Ireland's future as a successful region to assess very carefully the opportunity now available to focus forward. The economic players pledge their commitment to such a future. We invite the whole community to do likewise and to make the fresh start which has hitherto proved so elusive.

9 May 2000