

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

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PRIME MINISTER'S STATEMENT

NORTHERN IRELAND

29 NOVEMBER 1995

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

PARLIAMENTARY STATEMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER

With permission Madam Speaker I will make a statement about Northern Ireland.

Yesterday evening, the Irish Prime Minister and I met at Downing Street to launch a new initiative in the Northern Ireland peace process.

A copy of our joint communiqué has been placed in the Library of the House.

In the fifteen months since the first of the two ceasefires, there has been a dramatic improvement in daily life in Northern Ireland. People have enjoyed the freedom to go about their daily business without fear of terrorist attacks. Many new jobs have been created. New investment has come in. New opportunities have opened for people of all ages.

We have responded positively - following advice from the Chief Constable and GOC - to the much reduced threat to security. By the end of this year half of the army's emergency or roulement

- 2 -

battalions will have left Northern Ireland. Security infrastructure has been dismantled. Remission rates for scheduled offenders have been returned to their pre-1989 levels.

But, though we have a ceasefire, we are still far from a comprehensive political settlement. To work towards that, we must establish a negotiating process open to all democratic parties.

That aim underlies the twin track initiative which we have now launched with the Irish Government.

Preparatory talks

The first of the two tracks in the joint communiqué will involve invitations to the parties to intensive preparatory talks.

These are not substantive negotiations on Northern Ireland's constitutional future. They are designed to prepare for such negotiations.

There are many issues to be resolved if substantive negotiations are to take place successfully. The preparatory talks will consider the best structure and format for all-party negotiations, and how those

negotiations can address all the relevant relationships in an interlocking three-stranded process.

Several of the parties in Northern Ireland have suggested that an elected body could play an important part in all party negotiations. Other parties disagree. As the communiqué makes clear, this is an idea which will be discussed in the preparatory talks.

As I have indicated, meeting the requirements of paragraph 10 of the Downing Street Declaration will be an essential condition for any party claiming a seat at all-party negotiations. Not all of the parties yet do so. This too will be a valid subject for discussion in the preparatory talks.

The format for these talks is intentionally flexible and permissive. We shall build on the exchanges and bilateral contacts which have already taken place. We shall treat each party equally. Exchanges can be bilateral or - where the parties so wish and where it will further the objectives of the preparatory talks - they could be multilateral.

- 4 -

Madam Speaker, this new round of preparatory talks is an opportunity for each of the parties in Northern Ireland to express its view, in whatever format it chooses, on the best way of moving the political process forward.

It is an opportunity for them to work together with one or other or both Governments, according to their wishes.

It is an opportunity to generate fresh momentum.

It threatens no one, no interest and no party.

I hope that all of the parties, in their own way, will take advantage of this opportunity.

The objective of moving towards a just and comprehensive settlement will be of benefit to all.

Decommissioning

Let me turn now to the decommissioning of the weapons and explosives held in large number by paramilitary organisations linked to political parties in Northern Ireland.

- 5 -

Before the Downing Street Declaration and the ceasefire, we recognised that the need to address this question was one of the practical consequences that had to follow the ending of violence.

In a democratic society, political parties cannot be linked to private armies. In a society where parties are committed to exclusively peaceful methods, there can be no need and no justification for holding illegal weapons and explosives.

In a democracy, parties and Governments cannot be expected to negotiate under the duress of an implicit threat of a return to violence.

For that reason, we have throughout this year sought to engage the representatives of both Sinn Fein and the Loyalists in an exploratory dialogue on how their weapons will be taken out of commission.

In order to achieve more progress in that area we have now agreed with the Irish Government to establish an international body to provide an independent assessment of the decommissioning issue and have given it specific tasks.

- 6 -

The body will consist of three members under the chairmanship of Senator George Mitchell from the United States. They will act in a personal capacity and on an advisory basis.

The body has been asked to:

- identify and advise on a suitable and acceptable method for full and verifiable decommissioning; and
- report whether there is a clear commitment on the part of those in possession of such arms to work constructively to achieve that.

We expect the body to invite relevant parties to submit their analysis of matters relevant to the decommissioning issue. The governments are not setting limits to the scope of the submissions which may be made to it. It will be for the international body, in reaching conclusions within its remit, to consider such evidence on its merits.

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- 7 -

We will not be asking the international body to question the Government's position on what has become known as the third Washington criterion. The body has not been established to make recommendations on when decommissioning should start. That is a matter for a governmental decision; and, as I have indicated, it is properly a matter for discussion in the preparatory talks.

To avoid any doubt, let me stress that the Government stand by the three criteria on decommissioning which my right hon Friend set out in Washington earlier this year.

We cannot see a way of securing the necessary confidence to bring all parties to the negotiating table without a start being made to the decommissioning of illegal arms.

This is not a matter of dogma, but of practicality. It goes without saying that we, like the Irish Government, will consider constructively any practicable suggestions that could help bring all parties into negotiations on the basis of the Downing Street Declaration.

- 8 -

Conclusion

Madam Speaker,

It is no secret that yesterday's agreement between the two Governments required long and difficult negotiations. The British and Irish Governments agree on the need for disarmament by the paramilitary organisations, but have an acknowledged difference of opinion over its timing. We have decided not to allow that difference to stand in the way of forward movement along these twin tracks. That is a measure of our determination to continue working together.

We have asked the international body to report by the middle of January. We hope that progress in both tracks will then enable the two Governments to launch all-party negotiations by the end of February.

That is our firm aim. I am confident it is attainable, but it will require a serious commitment by all concerned.

We are ready to make that commitment. But let me make a crucial point. The British and Irish Governments can't make peace in

- 9 -

Northern Ireland. Our role in the process is to facilitate it.

We have borne a great deal of the burden.

We have been ready to take risks for peace.

Now is the time for others to do so as well.

Now is the time for all parties and groups to make a sincere and constructive contribution:

- for the paramilitaries on both sides to give not merely qualified verbal assurances, but a real and tangible commitment to peace.

If they mean peace, they don't need guns and semtex;

- for all political parties to enter the preparatory talks, not with rigid and irreconcilable postures, but with a will to make them work.

Because ultimately a lasting and peaceful settlement is in their

Let them all have the courage to grasp it.