

**REMARKS BY THE PRIME MINISTER THE RIGHT HONOURABLE TONY BLAIR  
MP ON BEHALF OF THE UK AND IRISH GOVERNMENTS AT A  
PRESSCONFERENCE WITH THE TAOISEACH, BERTIE AHERN TD  
HILLSBOROUGH CASTLE, CO DOWN**

**1 APRIL 1999**

**We believe we now have a basis for agreement on the very difficult issues we have been discussing.**

**Together, we are publishing a Declaration which we now believe can resolve these issues.**

**Let me say first how pleased we are that these talks have been conducted in such a positive, friendly manner which does credit to the parties, their leaders, and the peace process.**

**This entire process is about dialogue and democracy and leaving the past behind. If anything has shown that in action, it is the spirit of these discussions.**

**One year on, we can be proud to say that it is clear from these discussions that:**

- **all of the parties are absolutely wedded to the Good Friday Agreement;**
- **all of the parties accept that all of its measures must be implemented;**
- **all of the parties insist that violence must be given up for good;**
- **all of the parties recognise that this obligation must be fulfilled according to the timescale set out in the Good Friday Agreement;**
- **and all of the parties recognise the democratic mandate of others**

**These are very important principles and very important advances. And do not forget that a good deal has already been done to make the Good Friday Agreement a reality.**

**But we had still not resolved how to establish the executive on a satisfactory basis for all the parties. We believe we can now do so.**

**The Declaration we are publishing sets out a process by which we will, within the next few weeks, establish all the institutions: the executive; the North/South Ministerial Council, the North/South Implementation Bodies, the British/Irish Council and the British/Irish Inter-Governmental Conference.**

**The Declaration states too that while there is no pre-condition to decommission, there is an obligation to decommission.**

**The Declaration sets out how:**

- **nominations will be made under the d'Hondt procedure of those to take up office as Ministers, when powers are devolved;**
- **at a date not later than one month from the d'Hondt procedure is run, a collective act of reconciliation will take place which will see arms put beyond use on a voluntary basis, in a manner verified by the Independent International Commission on**

**Decommissioning. General de Chastelain is making a statement in support of this today.**

- **within the same timescale, the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning will make a report on progress. It would be understood by all that the successful implementation of the Agreement will only be achieved if the steps above are taken within the proposed timescales; if not, the nominations would have to be confirmed by the Assembly.**
- **around the time of the act of reconciliation, powers will be devolved and the British-Irish Agreement will enter into force to set up the institutions.**
- **in addition, we envisage further moves on normalisation and demilitarisation in recognition of the changed security situation.**

**Both Governments have put real effort into this set of proposals, and are convinced that we will get full agreement upon them. There will now be a pause for reflection, with a final round of meetings reconvening on Tuesday, 13 April, to finalise the agreement.**

**And given the manner in which the parties are facing up to their responsibilities, and their duties as democrats, we have no doubt whatever that we will get there.**

**We cannot emphasise enough how positive the mood has been, and how constructive the approach of the parties.**

**That, allied to the force of the vast majority of people willing us on, is what will ensure that we do get there.**

**There is no turning back on the road to peace. Today's Declaration, following the Good Friday Agreement of a year ago, is another huge and significant milestone on the way to our destination. A Northern Ireland free from conflict, from prejudice, from the battles of the past. Offering the children here the future they deserve, which is now coming within their grasp.**

## **DECLARATION**

**It is now one year since the Good Friday Agreement was concluded. Last May, it was emphatically endorsed by the people, North and South, and as such it now represents their democratic will.**

**The Agreement, in its own words, offers a truly historic opportunity for a new beginning. It gives us a chance, in this generation, to transcend the bitter legacy of the past and to transform relationships within Northern Ireland, between North and South, and between these islands.**

**All parties firmly believe that the violence we have all lived through must be put behind us. Never again should we or our children have to suffer the consequences of conflict. It must be brought to a permanent end. In partnership together we want to ensure a future free from conflict.**

**The realisation of that future places heavy obligations on us all, individually and collectively. The implementation in full of the Agreement is inevitably a lengthy and**

**complex process, involving continuing effort and commitment on all our parts.**

**It is encouraging and important that, even though much remains to be done, very substantial progress has already been made in turning the promise of the Agreement into a reality. We must not forget or underplay how far we have already come.**

**Balanced changes both to the Irish Constitution and to British constitutional legislation based on the principle of consent, have been approved and are ready to take effect.**

**The Northern Ireland Assembly was elected last June and has since then been preparing for devolution. The international agreements signed in Dublin on 8 March provide for the establishment of the North/South Ministerial Council and Implementation Bodies, the British-Irish Council and the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference.**

**The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission has been established and its members appointed, and the new Equality Commission has been legislated for. Comparable steps by the Irish Government are well under way.**

**The needs of victims of violence, and their families, including those of the disappeared, are being addressed in both jurisdictions, though we acknowledge that for many their pain and suffering will never end. The commitments in the Agreement in relation to economic, social and cultural issues, including as regards the Irish language, are being carried forward, though much of this work is inevitably long-term.**

**Steps have been taken towards the normalisation of security arrangements and practices, while the Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland and the review of criminal justice are both well advanced in their vital work.**

**Numerous prisoners, in both jurisdictions, have benefited from mechanisms providing for their accelerated release.**

**Against this background there is agreement among all parties that decommissioning is not a pre-condition but is an obligation deriving from their commitment in the Agreement, and that it should take place within the timescale envisaged in the Agreement, and through the efforts of the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning.**

**Sinn Fein have acknowledged these obligations, but are unable to indicate the timescale on which decommissioning will begin. They do not regard the Agreement as imposing any requirement to make a start before the establishment of the new Institutions. The UUP do not wish to move to the establishment of the new institutions without some evident progress with decommissioning.**

**It would be a tragedy if this difference of view about timing and the sequence of events prevented the implementation of the Agreement from advancing. We believe that decommissioning will only happen against a background where implementation is actively moving forward. Continued progress in establishing the new institutions will in itself create greater confidence. On the other hand, it is understandable that those who take the next**

**steps in implementation should seek to be assured that these steps are not irrevocable if in the event no progress is made with decommissioning**

**We therefore propose the following way forward.**

**On [date to be set] nominations will be made under the d'Hondt procedure of those to take up office as Ministers when powers are devolved.**

**At a date to be proposed by the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning, but not later than [one month after nomination date] a collective act of reconciliation will take place. This will see some arms put beyond use, on a voluntary basis, in a manner which will be verified by the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning, and further moves on normalisation and demilitarisation in recognition of the changed situation on security. In addition to the arrangements in respect of military material, there will at the time be ceremonies of remembrance of all victims of violence, to which representatives of all parties and the two Governments, and all churches, will be invited.**

**Around the time of the act of reconciliation, powers will be devolved and the British/Irish Agreement will enter into force. The following institutions will then be established: the North/South Ministerial Council, the North/South Implementation Bodies, the British/Irish Council and the British/Irish Intergovernmental Conference.**

**By [one month after nomination date], the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning will make a report on progress. It is understood by all that the successful implementation of the Agreement will be achieved if these steps are taken within the proposed timescales; if they are not taken, the nominations mentioned above will fall to be confirmed by the Assembly.**