

'On this important day, I wish to begin by offering my thanks and the thanks of my party to the Independent Chairmen who have played such a pivotal role in these talks. We owe an enormous debt of gratitude to Senator Mitchell, Prime Minister Holkeri and to General de Chastelain, as indeed to all the people of Northern Ireland, and Ireland as a whole.

"I wish to offer, also, our thanks to the Prime Minister and to the Taoiseach for the clear priority they have given to our problem and the massive energy of your governments which you have harnessed to promote agreement.

"I wish to extend our deep appreciation to all of the other parties for their commitment to achieving agreement. All of us must maintain that commitment for our agreement to develop.

"Only on the basis of equality, fairness and respect for our differences could we begin to heal the deep divisions between our people. This historic agreement enables us, at last, to start the healing process. It creates the partnership framework which will allow us to do so.

"We in the SDLP concluded many years ago that we could not lay the basis for agreement against a background of violence and disorder. That is why we entered the process of dialogue, to do everything in our power to bring peace to our streets. The peace created the space for these talks, which have now concluded with agreement, hope for the future and what must be a determination to maintain an agreement.

"It has long been the view of the SDLP, that the task which lay before us, was to resolve the three sets of relationships - between the two traditions in the North; between North and South; between Britain and Ireland.

"That analysis was reflected in the agenda of these talks - the three strands. Equally, it has been our view, since the foundation of the SDLP, that we needed a new beginning, based on equal partnership in the North; equal partnership between North and South; a new cooperative relationship between Britain and Ireland. These proposals are reflected in the outcome we have agreed today.

"This process is not about the victory or defeat of nationalism or unionism. It is about something much greater. Today, as Fergal Keane said in relation to South Africa, we can take a collective breath and begin to blow away the cobwebs of the past. We can begin to break the bondage of fear which has so damaged our people and our country, difficult and demanding though this will be in the coming days and weeks.

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"For 30 years we have pursued the politics of acceptance and inclusion rather than exclusion and rejection. For 30 years we wanted to escape the narrow sectarian mindset which choked generosity and openness of spirit. Today we can witness the start of a new mindset based on tolerance, dialogue and accommodation.

"There can be a new dawn in politics on this island. We can agree a comprehensive settlement which allows both our traditions to work together. It will be a new agreed Ireland in which the rights and interests of both the nationalist and unionist traditions, and others, will be safeguarded and cherished. We must safeguard and cherish this agreement we have worked so hard to accomplish.

"The reality of living with difference and affirming identity is that we cannot achieve actualisation without mutual accommodation. Martin Luther King got to the heart of it when he said, 'I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be.' Nationalists cannot be what they ought to be until unionists are what they ought to be, and vice versa.

"Only once in a generation does an opportunity like this come along, an opportunity to resolve our deep and tragic conflict. No one should diminish the difficulties we face. No one should deny the tough decisions that have been made and tough choices that have to be made. We must draw reassurance that our agreement today reflects the firmest wish of all our people.

"Once before we came very close, only to have our hopes dashed. This time we must succeed. Whatever our anxieties, we have to seize this opportunity. And the opportunities which lie before us are vast - to create a new partnership between our divided people; to banish guns and bombs from our streets forever; to secure economic, social and cultural equality and progress, to build a new Ireland for our children.

"This is the beginning.

"This agreement will now be put to the people of this island, North and South. The people are sovereign and they will now decide. I have every confidence in their judgment and good sense, and I commend this agreement to them. We must join together and do likewise.