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MEDIA STATEMENT

**ANDREW HUNTER MP
CHAIRMAN, CONSERVATIVE NORTHERN IRELAND COMMITTEE
MONDAY, 24th APRIL, 1995**

"Conservative MPs will welcome the news that Sinn Fein has at last accepted the Government's conditions for ministerial involvement in exploratory dialogue. On this assurance, meetings between Sinn Fein and Ministers can begin. There has been strong backbench support for the Government's robust position on this subject.

"The Provisionals have been prevaricating and pontificating too long. It appears that their bluff has been called. In recent correspondence the Government increased the pressure on Sinn Fein and directly challenged Sinn Fein to accept the Government's terms or explain in detail why they rejected them. The strategy appears to have worked.

"Exploratory talks between Government officials and Sinn Fein began in December. Sinn Fein has been pressing for Ministerial involvement but the Government rightly insisted that there must first be a clear and reliable assurance that constructive discussion - particularly in achieving substantial progress on decommissioning arms - would be facilitated and accelerated by Ministers joining in. The Government throughout stressed that this would inevitably involve exploring the practicalities of decommissioning.

"According to the Government, in recent correspondence, Sinn Fein have demonstrated their acceptance of these conditions. This is most welcome. It must be stressed, however, that at this stage Sinn Fein is only admitted to exploratory dialogue with the Minister of State. This is very different from the substantive talks which the Secretary of State is initiating with the constitutional parties of Northern Ireland."

Andrew Hunter MP
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24/4/95

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SINN FEIN PRESS RELEASE

Sinn Féin welcomes the ending of the ban on ministerial contact with our party.

Sinn Féin entered the bi-lateral dialogue with British Government officials to:

- a) bring an end to the discrimination which our party and our electorate suffer, and;
- b) work out the logistics of all party peace talks which are the essential means to a political settlement.

We will pursue this with Michael Antrim. We welcome the support for equality from all of those who have raised this issue recently. It is obvious that if the peace process is to be advanced that the British Government must treat all citizens on the basis of equality.

In our correspondence with the British Government and most recently in our letter to them of April 20 we stated clearly the basis on which our dialogue must proceed. Democratic principles demand that Sinn Féin have the same access to political discussions and negotiations as the other main parties. The views of the Sinn Féin electorate must be included in the dialogue and negotiations which will shape the future of Ireland and the Irish people. It is our view as Irish Republicans that this must involve the ending of British jurisdiction.

~~On this basis we are arranging to meet with British Minister Michael Antrim to explore the British Government willingness to accord our party and our electorate full equality and access to the inclusive peace talks which are the essential next stage in the Peace process.~~

24 April 1995

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MINISTER TO JOIN EXPLORATORY DIALOGUE WITH SINN FEIN

Following intensive exchanges with Sinn Fein the Government believes that a sufficient basis now exists for the entry of Ministers into the exploratory dialogue with Sinn Fein.

The purposes of the Government's exploratory dialogue with Sinn Fein have been: to explore the basis upon which Sinn Fein would come to be admitted to an inclusive political talks process; to exchange views on how Sinn Fein would be able, over a period, to play the same part as other parties in the public life of Northern Ireland; and to examine the practical consequences of the ending of violence.

Ministers have needed to be clear, as with the loyalist parties, that, if and when they take part, constructive discussion - particularly in achieving substantial progress on the decommissioning of arms - would be facilitated and accelerated by their joining the dialogue.

The Government has made clear that, once Ministers join the dialogue, there will first need to be a substantive discussion, as a separate issue, on decommissioning of arms, including an exploration of the specific ways this can best be achieved. In reply, Sinn Fein have said that they will discuss, in a serious and constructive manner, any issue which the Government wishes to raise, including decommissioning of arms, with a view to seeking a resolution of this and all relevant issues.

The Government has reiterated that no subject is excluded from the dialogue. It will be glad to explain its policy and approach on any subject. Sinn Fein have made clear their wish to raise a number of issues, including those arising from the need for what they term "demilitarisation".

The Government has told Sinn Fein that the understandings set out in the Government's letters, reflected in this statement, provide a basis for Ministerial contacts in the exploratory dialogue. The Government has therefore proposed that a meeting should be held on this basis as soon as it can be arranged, at which the Minister of State, Michael Ancram, M.P., would lead the Government team.