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**Statement by the Taoiseach, Mr. John Bruton, T.D.,
on Northern Ireland, in Dail Eireann,
Wednesday, 4 December, 1996**

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

A Cheann Comhairle,

I welcome the opportunity afforded by this statement to report to the House on the current situation relating to Northern Ireland.

I believe that all of us in this House, and indeed all parties involved in efforts to reach an honourable and generally acceptable accommodation, have one aim in common. We remain fully committed to an inclusive process of negotiations, on exclusively democratic terms and, if at all possible, to conducting the negotiations against a totally peaceful backdrop.

Differences, when they arise - whether in this House or elsewhere - relate not to "where are we going?" but rather to "how do we get there?"

For some time now, the twin objectives of Government policy have been

- the establishment of a truly inclusive process of negotiations, and
- the earliest, credible restoration of the IRA ceasefire.

That is where we are going. Now let me talk about how we get there.

The history of the last twenty five years has shown one thing very clearly. Unless both Governments are travelling together on the same road and towards the same destination, progress is simply not possible. The problem that we are grappling with is immensely complex. In the first place, it is a problem involving the people who live in Northern Ireland. Beyond that it is a problem for the two Governments. It is not an Irish problem. It is not a British problem. It is a joint problem and therefore requires the Governments to take a joint approach. It is against that background that both Governments have created the basis for the restoration of the ceasefire and inclusive negotiations. That basis is contained in two agreed documents:

- the joint communiqué issued by the Prime Minister and myself on 28 February this year, and

- the Ground Rules for Substantive All-Party Negotiations published on 16 April last.

There are three important points to be made about these documents. First, they are agreed by both Governments. Second, they are public documents. Third, they post date the breakdown of the ceasefire through the murderous IRA attack in London's Docklands.

Paragraphs 8 and 9 of the Ground Rules document are particularly relevant.

That then is the agreed basis for moving forward.

There is, of course, the human element. It is a matter of fact that trust has been broken. When the IRA declared a ceasefire in 1994, it was presented on the basis that it would last. It did not. We must also take account of the fact that it was generally expected that Sinn Féin would participate in negotiations within a reasonable but undefined period. That did not happen.

The unionist community who, it is probably fair to say, never trusted the IRA ceasefire are now particularly distrustful, not just of the Republican Movement but perhaps of the process as a whole.

That is the background against which we are working as we head into next week's Anglo-Irish Summit. It is a background which recognises that there is an agreed basis for progress but which also recognises the need to deal with the issue of trust.

Since last February, the Government have worked hard to bring about an unequivocal restoration of the August 1994 ceasefire and, on that basis, a fully inclusive process of negotiations. We have engaged closely with the British Government, with John Hume and with others.

I still believe that a co-ordinated approach offers the best prospects for a successful outcome. The Government will therefore continue to work with the people I have referred to with the aim of securing a definitive and clear understanding on Sinn Féin's admittance to negotiations in the wake of an unequivocal restoration of the IRA ceasefire.

In particular, it is vitally important that there is a clear understanding on the timing and means of that party's entry into talks in such an eventuality.

My Government's position on this whole issue remains as it has always been. Our approach, as I have said, has been informed throughout by the joint position of the two Governments as set out in the February Communiqué and the Ground Rules paper.

This means that if the IRA clearly called an unequivocal ceasefire, in words that are believable, and provided there is adherence to both the cessation and the Mitchell Principles, then Sinn Féin should be admitted to the talks. In practical terms, given the imminence of the Christmas recess, this might have to be on resumption of the talks in the New Year, but there could be room for useful reciprocal confidence building contacts in the interval.

All roads, however, lead to an unequivocal restoration of the ceasefire, which should, of course, never have been broken. Its restoration now would reopen the road to the inclusive negotiations to which both Governments have given their commitment. I would appeal for it to be done without delay.

I want to make it absolutely clear that there is no justification now, nor has there ever been, for paramilitary violence from any quarter. Violence deepens divisions in an already deeply divided society like Northern Ireland. Only democratic and peaceful means can bring about, and nurture, the essential process of healing and reconciliation.

At the same time, however, we cannot ignore the political considerations and positions involved in trying to secure an unequivocal restoration of the IRA ceasefire while not raising unnecessary suspicions on the Loyalist side.

It is for this reason that both Governments are engaged in intensive contact with a view to developing our respective positions on the basis of the Ground Rules and the February Communiqué. That work will be continued in the coming days.

The two Governments must build on the substantive areas of agreement between us. These would include an openness on both our parts to work towards proposing for adoption of an agreed indicative timeframe for the talks as one way to constructively advance the negotiations.

The British Prime Minister and I will, next week, review the situation generally, including the prospects for substantive progress in the multi-party talks.

Turning to the multi-party talks, the Government remain convinced that the current impasse over the handling of the decommissioning issue can best be resolved on the basis of all participants agreeing to work constructively and in good faith to implement all aspects of the Mitchell Report. We believe that a breakthrough can be achieved provided the necessary determination exists on all sides.

Public confidence in current efforts to achieve political agreement would undoubtedly be greatly increased if there was clear and speedy movement to substantive three-strand negotiations. There are many issues of profound importance, within each of the three core relationships, which need to be addressed. I hope that negotiations on such matters can be commenced soon.

The Government have always appreciated the constructive and helpful role played by the United States in our collective efforts to secure the necessary forward movement. President Clinton and his Administration have been kept apprised of recent developments. The President shares the desire of both Governments for a successful outcome to the ongoing efforts aimed at securing inclusive and substantive negotiations against a background of peace.

I took the opportunity with Vice President Gore in Lisbon this week to express my appreciation for continuing American support. It certainly remains my firm view that with good will and determination on all sides, the twin objectives of a credible ceasefire and fully inclusive talks can be realised.

The polarising effects of this year's marching season underscore the urgency of the task facing us all. There has been extensive intimidation. There has been damage to property including to Orange halls and Protestant places of worship as well as to Catholic churches and schools. An equally sinister manifestation of violence has been orchestrated interference with people's right to worship.

All these actions are profoundly wrong, are contrary to the most basic of civil and religious liberties, and clearly point to the overriding need for the primacy of politics to be firmly re-established. The most effective way to achieve that is through inclusive all-party talks against a background of peace and leading to an agreed settlement to which Nationalists and Unionists, Republicans and Loyalists could give their support and allegiance. I can assure the House that my Government will continue to do everything we can, in co-operation with others, to bring that about.

As 1996 draws to a close, we must look forward with determination to the challenges and opportunities that await us all in the New Year. Let us all redouble our efforts to make 1997 the year in which a new chapter is opened on the way in which all the peoples of these islands co-exist in an environment of peace and tolerance.