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CHIEF CONSTABLE'S DECISION ON DRUMCREE CHURCH PARADE

STATEMENT BY THE RT HON DR MO MOWLAM, SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

From Opposition I watched the events last year at Drumcree with horror and dismay.

Since I was appointed as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland 65 days ago I have therefore made it clear that the problems associated with marches were my number one priority.

This Government is committed to the fundamental principles of fairness and justice. There will be no second-class citizens in Northern Ireland. I am determined to see full respect for, and equality of, civil, political, social and cultural rights and freedom from discrimination for everyone. We will give real expression to this by bringing into our law all the rights and freedoms protected by the European Convention of Human Rights.

Northern Ireland has seen over the centuries the clash of different identities. I am committed to building a society where the different identities are treated equally and enjoy mutual respect.

We approach the difficult and contentious issue of parades against this background of fundamental principles. Contentious parades see a clash of rights. The right to march - or peaceful assembly - and the right to live in your home without fear or intimidation.

We are committed to the right of peaceful assembly. It is one of the provisions of the European Convention which will soon be incorporated in law in Britain and Northern Ireland. But it is not an absolute right. As the ECHR spells out, it can be subject to lawful restrictions on the grounds of public order or to protect the rights and freedoms of others.

Most people agree that the best approach where rights are in conflict is to seek to balance them in an accommodation. It's the common-sense approach. It is the approach taken in the North Report, which my Government is going to implement. And it is the approach which I and the Chief Constable have followed in trying to resolve the dispute over the routing of the Drumcree Church Parade.

No one should under-estimate the difficulties for those involved in reaching an accommodation on this issue. For some the very notion of accommodation or compromise equals defeat. To address these deeply felt concerns about disputed parades, I have had an intensive range of consultations with residents, marchers and other interested parties

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across Northern Ireland - some twenty meetings in the last six weeks alone. Many of those meetings have been with members of the Portadown Orange Lodge and the Garvaghy Road Residents Association.

I am sorry to say that my efforts, along with those of many others, have not borne fruit. Those whom I have met are sincere in their beliefs and loyal to their communities. I believe it is this very sincerity and loyalty that held them back from reaching an accommodation of the kind I and others have sought.

I have no doubt that such an accommodation is the desired outcome of the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland and throughout these islands.

The Chief Constable of the RUC has specific responsibilities in respect of marches, as set out in the 1987 Public Order Order. Under Article Four of the Order he is entitled to specify conditions under which a parade is to take place. His decision must be guided by the likely outcome of a parade, with or without conditions, in terms of serious public disorder and other consequences. Through a scrupulous process of weighing these factors and applying the law, he has decided that the Drumcree parade should proceed subject to the conditions he has set out. If these conditions are not fulfilled to the letter that is clearly something the Parades Commission will want to take into account in the future.

This decision is not an accommodation. Where there is intransigence on both sides, that cannot be achieved. But the Chief Constable's decision, which is his to make, has full authority. It is the rule of law. I fully support the action the Chief Constable has had to take but at the same time this is an outcome that I regret and that neither he nor I wanted.

I expect everyone in Northern Ireland to respect the rule of law. Civilised societies are nothing without it. They are nothing either unless basic principles of fairness and justice are upheld. These are at the heart of this Government's approach and will remain there.

Let me be quite clear. I never wanted a position where there was a need for an imposed decision. Like the vast majority of people here, I wanted to see a local accommodation. I have done my absolute utmost to achieve that accommodation, through the Proximity Talks, through the series of meetings I and John Steele have held, and through many other initiatives. My approach for the future will continue in the same way.

My approach also involves setting up new and better arrangements for dealing with these disputes for future years. I very much regret that the previous Government did not take the opportunity it had to put in place improved arrangements for this summer.

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We will bring forward new legislation on parades later this year. Most people accept that the current way of dealing with these disputes is not adequate. The independent report from Dr North and his colleagues will provide the basis for our new approach.

In shaping our proposals we will take into account the fears and sensitivities which these issues arouse on all sides. Our proposals will be subject to the fullest possible scrutiny by Parliament. We shall be ensuring that, when legislation is introduced later this year, it will benefit fully from the experience of this marching season, and the views of all those involved, to achieve any enhancements which are possible to increase the chances of local accommodation and the workability of new arrangements. That is the way ahead for the future.

I remain convinced that, had these mechanisms been in place this year, they would have made an important contribution. I am grateful to Alistair Graham and his team for their work this year, although I would stress they did not have a remit to engage in the decision making process. And they have had no direct influence on the decision which has, quite properly, been taken by the Chief Constable.

Last summer Northern Ireland witnessed a degree of public disorder which left a mark of shame on society here. It damaged beyond measure the image of this community in the eyes of the world. All the people of Northern Ireland have suffered as a consequence.

To anyone who may be thinking of revisiting that tragedy on their friends, their neighbours, their workmates, and their community let me say this.

Think before you act. Think about the families whose lives you might threaten, whose hopes you will dash, whose chances of a decent job, a decent home, a decent future you will diminish. No one is challenging the dignity and worth of the nationalist identity. Your voice is heard, and I will continue to listen - always. You have my word on that.

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