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PRIME MINISTER'S STATEMENT

NORTHERN IRELAND

MONDAY 5TH JULY 1999

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STATEMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER

With your permission Madam Speaker, I would like to make a statement on last week's talks on Northern Ireland.

Last Friday, I proposed a way forward for Northern Ireland.

The starting point was the Good Friday Agreement, which set out an agreed basis for a peace settlement in Northern Ireland. It offered the Unionists what they have sought for the last 70 years:

- the principle of consent: no change to the status of Northern Ireland without the agreement of the majority of its population;
- changes to the Irish constitution, with Dublin dropping its legal claim to the North;
- devolution of powers to Northern Ireland, with an elected Assembly, an Executive and other Institutions.

The Good Friday Agreement offers the Nationalists and Republicans :

- equality, justice, and the normalisation of Northern Ireland society;
- for the first time since partition, the ability to share power and responsibility and not have their electoral mandate set to nought;
- a range of new institutions, including North-South bodies;
- over time, as the security situation improves, demilitarisation.

Above all, the Good Friday Agreement offered all the people of Northern Ireland the prospects of permanent peace and an end to violence. It is the only true way forward for Northern Ireland.

Of course, difficulties remain. There is still violence, much of by Loyalists opposed to the Good Friday Agreement. There is still conflict and bitterness, as we can see in Portadown, where I will continue to work for a settlement of the Drumcree issue.

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But life in Northern Ireland has improved immeasurably since the Good Friday Agreement. Normality has returned to most parts of the province.

Whatever their disagreements, the two sides now talk to one another regularly.

But one vital issue is unresolved: how to secure the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons. The Good Friday Agreement required all parties to use their best endeavours to secure decommissioning.

On 25 June, the Taoiseach and I secured the commitment of all the parties which signed the Good Friday Agreement to three principles on which the rest of our work was then based:

(i) an inclusive Executive should be formed exercising devolved powers;
(ii) all paramilitary arms should be decommissioned by May 2000;
(iii) decommissioning should be carried out in a manner determined by the International Commission on Decommissioning under General John de Chastelain.

Both sides need certainty. Unionists want certainty that decommissioning will happen, and a guarantee that, if it does not, they will not be left in an Executive with those who refuse to do so.

Republicans want the certainty that Unionists are serious about participating in a genuinely inclusive government.

Our agreement last Friday provides both.

In more detail, our proposal is as follows:

Northern Ireland Ministers would be nominated by the parties, using the d'Hondt procedure, on 15 July. The devolution order would be laid before Parliament on the following day, and powers transferred on 18 July.

The de Chastelain Commission would require a start to the process of decommissioning. The General has already said that he expects this to be within, and I quote, 'literally a couple of days'.

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The 'process of decommissioning' begins when a paramilitary group

> 'makes an unambiguous commitment that decommissioning will be completed by 22 May 2000 and commences detailed discussions of actual modalities (amounts, types, location, timing) with the Commission through an authorised representative.'

So there would have to be a definitive statement of intent, certified by de Chastelain literally within days. If it doesn't happen and de Chastelain certifies a breach of this process, then at that point the Executive is unwound. So we will know within days whether the decommissioning is to happen or not.

The Commission then sets a further time limit, within which there is to be a start to actual decommissioning of weapons. The General has said that he would expect this to be within a few weeks.

Again, should the actual decommissioning not come as de Chastelain has laid down according to the Good Friday Agreement, then again the failsafe kicks in.

De Chastelain is due to make reports on progress on actual decommissioning in September, December and May 2000, by which time it is to be complete.

This is all entirely in line with the Good Friday Agreement. Under it, parties are expected to use their best efforts to secure decommissioning. Last Friday's Agreement is the basis for how that will be judged.

Should default occur, the institutions are suspended automatically whilst we find a way forward. We are all then, in effect, back to where we are now. But with these two vital differences. The blame for default is clear. And the parties are then free to move on in an Executive without the defaulting party.

I cannot make the other parties agree to a new Executive. I cannot force anyone to sit in a Government with anyone else. But I can make sure that Sinn Fein do not continue in an Executive with the UUP should there be a default of the de Chastelain process. All this will be set out in legislation.

It is a far better deal than was on offer at Hillsborough. That offered a token act of decommissioning, dependent on reciprocal steps by the British

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and Irish with no clear framework for completing the process by May 2000.

This provides a guarantee of a complete process of decommissioning, plus a failsafe that protects fully the interests of the Unionists.

So there is a challenge here to all parties:

- to Unionists to agree to a power sharing Executive;

- to Republicans not just to give up violence, but to decommission weapons in accordance with the undertakings of the Good Friday Agreement;

- to Nationalist opinion to support parties implementing this Agreement and not support those who refuse to.

If last Friday's Agreement is put through, we will know in days whether the paramilitaries are serious about decommissioning their weapons. After 30 years of bloodshed, grief-stricken families, terror-torn communities, is it not worth waiting 30 days to see if the undertakings made here are fulfilled? If they are, then peace will come, real peace. If they are not, then we will know that the challenge of true democracy was too much for those linked to paramilitary groups. Either way, we will know. Discuss the detail. Debate it. Engage. But don't throw away the best chance for peace we will have this generation.

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