

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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Reference Code:	2023/154/51
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Mr Whelan
The Taoiseach referred to the IRA statement of this evening by way of an interjection into this statement. 15.2.2000

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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Statement on Northern Ireland by the Taoiseach to the Dáil,

15 February 2000

It is a cause of great disappointment to me to have to address the House in these circumstances. I know that this sense of disappointment is shared by every one of us here. Our disappointment is all the greater because the rich potential of the Good Friday Agreement has, since the establishment of the institutions in December, begun to translate itself into full reality. And few would have anticipated just how quickly and how significantly the institutions would begin to make their mark.

The Executive, under the joint stewardship of David Trimble and Séamus Mallon, has succeeded in bringing together representatives from both communities to work together with common purpose. The long awaited 'real politics' has begun with local - and locally accountable - Ministers taking decisions on matters of enormous importance and significance in the lives of the people of Northern Ireland. The operation of the Executive has demonstrated fully that the values underpinning the Agreement - partnership, mutual respect and equality - can be brought to bear in a meaningful and practical way for the benefit of both nationalists and unionists.

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Similarly, the Assembly has been working well. Like any other elected body, it has seen its share of robust debate. But I have been deeply impressed by the manner in which parliamentarians from all perspectives and backgrounds have been approaching their work with diligence, commitment and enthusiasm.

Ministers from both jurisdictions on the island have been meeting each other regularly and frequently in the North/South Ministerial Council, to the point where such meetings have become almost unremarkable. But, in any longer-term historic perspective, the very ordinariness of these contacts is itself astounding. And at their meetings, Ministers from North and South have been taking decisions which stand to benefit all of the people of the island in a practical, meaningful and constructive way, and to promote real partnership.

The Implementation Bodies are up and running. The British-Irish Council and the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference have identified for themselves substantial programmes of work which they are now beginning to take forward.

As I have said, few in December would have anticipated such solid progress, with so few teething problems, having been made in just ten weeks.

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But yet we now find ourselves in a situation where, as I said in my article in the *Irish Times* yesterday, difficulties of trust and confidence have once again crystallised around the issue of decommissioning and the Assembly and the Executive have been suspended. I passionately wish that it were not so. It was not an outcome that any supporter of the Agreement would have wished to see and I firmly believe that nobody other than those who remain firmly opposed to the Agreement can relish the prospect of suspension.

But suspension has happened. And it is a very serious setback. The Government did all it could to seek to avert it.

We now need to dedicate ourselves not to apportioning blame, because recrimination simply makes our task more difficult, but to ensuring the earliest possible restoration of the institutions so that the progress we have all welcomed can be built upon and developed.

Throughout the peace process, for at least the past five years, decommissioning has been a thorn in our sides. It has provoked emotions and polarised attitudes in a way which is out of proportion to its intrinsic importance, significant though it is. It proved impossible for the parties and the Governments alone to resolve, and was so charged and difficult an issue that the parties to the Good Friday Agreement decided that it was best left to the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning to oversee.

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Similarly, both as they entered and as they left the Mitchell Review, it was common ground among all of the pro-Agreement parties that the decommissioning which they were all committed to seeking to bring about should be carried out in a manner determined by the Independent Commission.

The pre-eminent role of the Commission with regard to decommissioning is, therefore, unquestioned. As I have said elsewhere, the de Chastelain Commission is the instrument of the Agreement in terms of decommissioning and the key to it actually happening. That is why it is so important that we study carefully what it has had to say.

Since devolution and the entry into force of the British-Irish Agreement, the Commission has made three reports to the Governments.

On 10 December, the Commission was able to positively report that the improved political atmosphere created by the establishment of the new political institutions, the renewed collective commitment of the parties, and the appointment of authorised representatives by the IRA and the UFF provided "*the basis for an assessment that decommissioning will occur*".

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On 31 January, and following several meetings with authorised representatives, the Commission was further able to report that it had been assured by the IRA of its unequivocal continuing support for the political process. The Commission also acknowledged the important part that the maintenance of the IRA cease-fire has played, and continues to play, in the political advances that have been achieved to date. However, it also reported that, at that point, it had received no information as to when decommissioning would start. As both Prime Minister Blair and I said at that time, clarity was needed about the intentions of the paramilitary organisations. We both recognised, and we still recognise, that decommissioning is an integral and essential aspect of the Agreement. It is neither possible nor wise to hope that the issue will simply wither away.

However, on 31 January, the Commission also placed its statement in the context of on-going negotiations and undertook to report any concrete progress to the Governments.

Both before and after the de Chastelain report of 31 January, the Minister for Foreign Affairs and I, together with our most senior officials engaged in the most intense and extensive discussions with the parties - particularly with Sinn Féin - to facilitate, in whatever way we could, a successful outcome.

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The result of those negotiations was the report submitted to the two Governments on 11 February, which I have already described as highly significant. In that report, following further contacts with the IRA representative, the Commission was able to state that, and here I would like to quote the exact words of the Commission:

> *"The representative indicated to us today the context in which the IRA will initiate a comprehensive process to put arms beyond use."*

It was also able to state that:

> *"The Commission believes that this commitment....holds out the real prospect of an agreement which would enable it to fulfil the substance of its mandate."*

Anyone who has been engaged in the process and, in particular, who has studied the difficult question of decommissioning, will realise the deep significance of these statements. In effect, what the Commission is saying is that, for the first time, it believes that it has a commitment from the IRA itself that decommissioning will happen. This is, beyond doubt, a huge advance and progress which we should build upon as quickly as possible.

I am glad that the British Government has also recognised the significance of this statement, as have the political parties.

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There is now a basis on which the de Chastelain Commission should be able to take forward its work quickly. But that is likely to happen only in a context where the institutions are functioning. As Senator Mitchell said in November on publication of his final report, one thing which is certain is that without the institutions there will be no decommissioning.

But I also appreciate, given the long legacy of distrust which has surrounded this question, that there are questions to which the report inevitably gives rise which need to be worked through.

It is for this reason that I have urged David Trimble to go to talk to the Commission and to seek assurance from General de Chastelain. The General is a man of great integrity and one in whom all of the participants in this process have felt able to place their complete trust. His credibility is unquestioned. I am sure that he will be pleased to assist in whatever way he can in enabling us to move forward.

Similarly, I hope that, having played such a constructive and hugely valuable part in making such a report possible, Sinn Féin will also wish to offer whatever assurances they can to their partners in the political process. For this reason, I have said that it would also be most useful for David Trimble to meet with Gerry Adams to discuss the contents of the de Chastelain report.

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With such contacts, and such assurances, I firmly believe that it should be possible to bring the Assembly and the Executive back into operation as quickly as possible. It is in nobody's interest to see a political vacuum develop. Having made so much progress, we cannot now let matters slide into stalemate.

I can assure the House that, for the Government's part, no effort will be spared in seeking to move matters forward.

Since the events of last Friday, I have been in constant contact with Prime Minister Blair. The Minister for Foreign Affairs also met with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland twice in Belfast yesterday, where they discussed the de Chastelain report and how best to secure the earliest restoration of the institutions. The Minister also has had meetings with the UUP, Sinn Féin, Alliance, the Women's Coalition and the PUP. Tonight the Government are meeting the SDLP. Tomorrow, I will be meeting Prime Minister Blair in London and together we will be meeting the leaderships of the Ulster Unionist Party, the SDLP and Sinn Féin. We are determined to maintain the momentum towards restoration of the institutions.

On the basis of the contacts that have taken place, I can assure the House that the British and Irish Governments are absolutely at one on the need to secure the earliest possible progress so that suspension can be short-lived. Moreover, none of the parties want the institutions to be placed in deep freeze.

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As we work to end suspension, we need to make continuing progress on other aspects of the Agreement where full implementation has yet to be achieved. In this regard, I very much welcome the Secretary of State's clear statement of his continuing determination to implement the Patten Report.

It is important that the review of the criminal justice system be published as soon as possible and that it be comprehensive and ambitious in its recommendations. And it is obvious that progress in security normalisation, which must be urgently advanced, and progress in decommissioning can be mutually reinforcing.

But as we are working to move matters forward, I am conscious that the decision of the Secretary of State last Friday to move to suspend the operation of the Assembly and the Executive has given rise not only to political questions and difficulties. Questions have also rightly been asked regarding legal and constitutional issues in the wake of suspension.

We have, as a state with a written Constitution, particular issues and responsibilities to which we must give careful consideration. When we amended the Constitution on 2 December last, in addition to the changes that were made to Articles 2 and 3, we also agreed to be bound by the British-Irish Agreement, which was thereby incorporated into the Constitution. And it is true that the terms of that Agreement do not expressly provide for the situation in which we now find ourselves, where some of the interlocking institutions under it have been suspended. This clearly gives rise to genuine concerns for the Government and it is important for us to tread carefully.

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But it is equally clear that these concerns will most readily be allayed by the speediest possible restoration of the institutions. Prolonging suspension can only make the situation more difficult, politically, practically and legally.

I know that there is a degree of public concern about the fact that the institutions have been suspended so quickly after the irreversible amendment of Articles 2 and 3. I understand the frustrations which have been expressed. But I would make a number of points which I hope will offer reassurance.

Firstly, all participants in the Agreement were called upon to take risks - ourselves included.

Secondly, balancing British constitutional change, including the repeal of the Government of Ireland Act, remains in place.

Thirdly, as I have said before, I believe that the new Articles stand by themselves as a valid and modern expression of our fundamental values and aspirations as a people.

To conclude, I will again assure the House that we will be sparing no effort to ensure the early restoration of the institutions. They are central to the Agreement. As I said earlier, their operation to date has been an extraordinary success. They have allowed the people of Northern Ireland a greater deal of control over matters directly affecting them than they have known in decades. An inclusive Executive has been put in place where both communities are fully represented.

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The North/South Ministerial Council has provided us with the means of advancing co-operation and partnership on this island in a more structured and therefore more effective way than ever before. The Implementation Bodies are doing real work.

But alongside the institutional developments, the implementation of other aspects of the Agreement has been delivering real and tangible benefits to all of the people - benefits

- in the area of human rights,
- of equality,
- of reconciliation.
- in policing,
- in opening up the possibility of a new and better future, built in partnership and hope together, and
- in presenting us with a unique opportunity to put the divisions of our past behind us so that the real business of improving the quality of life of all of our people can take precedence.

It is for these reasons, for these very sound reasons, that all of the parties know that we must overcome our present difficulties. I remain fully confident that we will.

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