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Statement by the Taoiseach Mr Bertie Ahern T.D., in Seanad Eireann on
Thursday, 17 December, 1998.

Before beginning, I am sure this House would wish to join with me in offering our warmest congratulations to both John Hume and David Trimble on becoming Nobel Laureates.

Northern Ireland has benefited enormously from the leadership shown by John Hume and David Trimble in the achievement of the Good Friday Agreement. John Hume has been, as the Nobel Committee expressed it, the principal architect of the structures that now comprise the Agreement

First Minister David Trimble now has the onerous task, together with Deputy First Minister Seamus Mallon, of leading on the implementation of crucial areas of the Agreement.

Today's debate gives us an opportunity to discuss where the Agreement stands now, to review our achievements over the past year and to explore how we might get through our current difficulties. Quite frankly, I would have wished to be able to report to the House that the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement is proceeding on schedule. After the overwhelming endorsement of the Agreement which so clearly now embodies the will of the people North and

South, I would have expected the Executive to be meeting at least in Shadow form, likewise the North-South Ministerial Council and the British-Irish Council to have held ^{the} ~~its~~ inaugural meetings on shadow form. I would have expected more significant progress to have been made on the normalisation of security, including a clearer start to the process of decommissioning paramilitary weapons.

Many of the Northern parties have done their utmost, and have been frustrated at the lack of progress beyond establishing the Assembly. All parties need to show a strong commitment to fulfilling their obligations under the Agreement and not creating unnecessary difficulties for others. It is highly undesirable to give any impression that a political vacuum is being allowed to develop or that any party will be allowed to hollow out or evade its obligations under the Agreement. There must be a credibility about the implementation process, and that is what over the last few weeks we have been seeking to secure.

Similarly, if we continue to focus on what divides and polarises, in terms of the Agreement, it will be difficult to make progress in its implementation. I have, from the moment of the achievement of the Agreement, continuously emphasised that partnership, equality and mutual respect, lie at the heart of the Agreement. To make the Agreement a reality, we must make these concepts a reality. The Irish Government, in fulfilling its commitments under the Agreement, has sought to do so in a spirit of partnership. We do not see our position on the North-South aspect of the Agreement as threatening, and we have no intention of engaging in a one-sided take-over of the areas involved. We have always said that this is a balanced Agreement. The Agreement recognises the substantial differences between equally legitimate political aspirations. We seek to accommodate these aspirations, through meaningful

institutions, while also believing that the practical benefits of these arrangements are clear.

The North-South Ministerial Council will bring the Irish Government and those with executive responsibilities in Northern Ireland together in equality. Council decisions will be by agreement, all operating in accordance with the rules for democratic authority and accountability in force in the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Oireachtas respectively. The Irish Government in all its dealings on these matters has sought to be realistic and businesslike. We want the relationship between North and South to be similarly disposed. Were our current proposals in regard to Implementation Bodies to be published today, I would defy anybody to conclude that they were excessive or threatening. They are the essence of reasonableness. But there has to be a balance between the different Strands of the Agreement. Those who fail to recognise this and who would seek to empty Strand Two of substance need to consider carefully the risks they are taking.

With regard to the Northern Ireland Assembly, we would wish to see everyone who is involved in politics there working to the same objective, the betterment of the people of Northern Ireland. In the ordinary political landscape diversity of view, even healthy partisanship is to be welcomed. The basis of political discourse is, of course, people with similar views coalescing and forming alliances to get things done. It would be a very dull political environment if every party was of the same persuasion. However, it is very difficult to comprehend politics that has stagnation at its very heart. In any evolving situation, and the political situation in Northern Ireland has evolved radically in recent years, politics must move and shift with the changing times, and this

change must be embraced. As part of this, all violence, political and sectarian, must be in the past. The Northern Ireland Assembly provides the opportunity for politicians from all of the parties to work on behalf of their constituents, for the people of Northern Ireland as a whole and to forge better relations on the island of Ireland and, through the British-Irish Council, between the people of these islands.

In short, we want to get on with it. Because at the end of the day, politics is not about making shapes on the tightrope, it is about delivering a service to the public.

As Senators may be aware, our negotiations on implementation bodies and areas for co-operation have centred mainly on the areas identified in the Good Friday Agreement. I do not intend now to add substantively to what I have said earlier or to go into the details of our negotiating strategy, but I will say that a considerable amount of progress has been made; and that insofar as full agreement has not been reached, it is not because of lack of enthusiasm, homework or flexibility on the part of the Irish Government. It is somewhat disappointing that full agreement has not been reached yet, but work will continue and we will try and achieve agreement at the earliest possible time. There are of course many horizontal issues such as financial, legal and personnel issues on which, again, a considerable amount of work has been done but, until final agreement has been reached on the areas, cannot be brought to finality, and of course many of the issues will have to be considered carefully with staff interests.

As has been said many times, in addition to the practical benefits that they bring, the North-South arrangements provide institutional expression to the identity that northern nationalists share with people in the South .

It has been long recognised, going back to Eamon de Valera and other statesmen that the wishes to belong of Unionists and Nationalists in Northern Ireland, divergent as they are, can live together more easily if Ireland and Britain can live closer together too. Successive Governments have been very conscious of the importance of closer relations and co-operation. The speech by Prime Minister Blair to the Joint Sitting of the Houses of the Oireachtas was a fitting reflection of the new departure in relations between our two countries represented by the British-Irish Agreement. The British-Irish Council will provide a useful forum to promote the harmonious and mutually beneficial development of the totality of relationships among the people of these islands.

The conclusion of the Good Friday Agreement was one of the most important developments in these islands and coupled with the movement towards devolution in Britain, I hope and believe that it will lead to a new spirit of co-operation and friendship between the different component parts of these islands. It will be difficult in future for anyone to take the position that Britain equals England or London. In future Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland will have institutional expression of their own distinctive political personalities.

The British-Irish Council will have the potential to evolve over time while fully respecting sovereignty, and it may contribute to the more effective representation of regional as well as national interests. While naturally, in view of the 31 October deadline, our main focus to date has been on the North-South dimension, the Strand Three dimensions, the British-Irish Council and the

Intergovernmental Conference have also received attention and will be further developed in the coming months.

The coming months will also see activity intensify in the legislative area. In addition to the legislation necessary to implement Strand Two arrangements, the Government's legislative programme will include the establishment of the Human Rights Commission; equal status legislation and the amendment of the Nationality and Citizenship Act, 1956. Other legislative measures to strengthen and underpin the constitutional protection of human rights may be decided on in the light of the provisions of the Agreement, which requires us to consider the possible incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights into Irish law; and the implementation of the recommendations of the committee which will review the Offences Against the State Acts. I would like to acknowledge here the helpful contributions by opposition parties and party leaders to this process and I would also like to acknowledge and thank them for their ongoing support for the difficult process which we are going through.

And this process is difficult. But since it began, the process has had many periods where it seemed stalled and where some began to lose faith. But it has survived. At crucial times we have, all of us, been able to take the actions necessary to move on. We have, on all sides, had to take actions that we did not necessarily want to take, and we know, and acknowledge, the pain and suffering caused to others by some of the actions we have taken. But all of the actions and all of the risks we have taken, have been taken to consolidate peace and work towards a better future for ourselves and for generations to come. Finally, I would like to refer to decommissioning. We believed, in concluding the Good Friday Agreement, that we had found a way to provide the conditions

and the formula whereby political progress and decommissioning would and could take place sooner rather than later. Eight months on from the signing of the Agreement, it is disappointing that the issue could remain an obstacle. If demilitarisation is the objective, no one can opt out of making a real contribution to it. Everyone knows the situation, but I would return to what I said earlier. All of the parties to the negotiations, all those who signed up to the Agreement, all those who continue to support the Agreement, must act in a spirit of partnership. We must recognise that for all of us there are difficulties. That stalemate is the enemy of everyone. The progress we have made, we have made together, bringing our supporters and the people with us.

On 22 May the people of this island, North and South, gave us their support because they wanted accommodation. We have a duty to the people to move forward together, to implement all of the Agreement, in the letter and in the spirit, and to build that lasting accommodation. At all stages of the peace process it was agreed that a normal civil society was the ultimate goal, and on the Nationalist and Republican side that this would involve complete demilitarisation. An armed peace is not demilitarisation. If the Agreement and its institutions are to work, then their establishment must be accompanied by a tangible commitment to dismantling on all sides the structures and arsenals of conflict.