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STATEMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER
 THE RIGHT HONOURABLE JOHN MAJOR MP

NORTHERN IRELAND PEACE PROCESS

HOUSE OF COMMONS
 WEDNESDAY 28 FEBRUARY 1996

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**NORTHERN IRELAND:
PARLIAMENTARY STATEMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER**

Madam Speaker, with your permission I will make a statement on the Anglo-Irish Summit earlier today and its implications for the peace process in Northern Ireland.

The Taoiseach and I met in Downing Street this afternoon and agreed a way forward, set out in our communiqué, copies of which have been placed in the Library of the House. Let me summarise the main points of the approach.

First, both Governments condemn unreservedly the IRA abandonment of the ceasefire and subsequent acts of terrorism and call for the immediate and unequivocal restoration of the ceasefire.

Second, we have confirmed that the two Governments will have no Ministerial dialogue with Sinn Féin until the ceasefire is restored.

Third, I am glad to say that the Irish Government has now made clear their support for an elective process that is broadly acceptable to the parties in Northern Ireland. We and the Irish Government will conduct further intensive consultations with the parties between now and mid-March. After that, this Government will bring forward for consideration by this House appropriate legislation for the elective process, and we will take other decisions necessary for the peace process to take place.

Fourth, both Governments reaffirm their commitment to all-party negotiations with a comprehensive agenda. These will be convened on 10 June, following a broadly acceptable elective process. Whether these negotiations will include Sinn Féin will depend on whether the ceasefire has been restored.

Fifth, we have agreed that at the beginning of the negotiations, in order to build confidence, all participants, including Sinn Féin if the ceasefire has been restored, will need to make clear their total and absolute commitment to the principles of democracy and non-violence

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set out in the Mitchell report and to address. also at the beginning of the negotiations, Senator Mitchell's proposals on decommissioning.

Madam Speaker, I believe these agreements and commitments represent a balanced approach to which I hope all the parties in Northern Ireland will be able to subscribe. No-one will find in there all they might have asked for. Equally, no-one need fear that their basic interests and requirements are being overlooked.

The approach the Taoiseach and I agreed marks out a clear route to all-party negotiations. We believe that this route is viable and direct. That is why we have set a firm date by which the negotiations will be launched.

There is still detail to be filled in, and some important issues to be settled. That is the purpose of the intensive consultations due to start next week and last until mid-March. But we now have a framework and a timescale to address and decide these matters. We are ready to meet all the parties in whatever format best suits them, but I repeat that there can be no dialogue between Ministers and Sinn Fein until the ceasefire is unequivocally restored. That is the Irish Government's position as well.

The issues still to be settled include:

first, the nature of the electoral system to be used in the elective process. There are strong views for and against different systems. While the decision is for us, we intend first to explore and test all the options in discussions with the parties before coming to our decision on what seems most broadly acceptable.

secondly, the nature and role of an elected body that will come out of the elections. Again there are strongly held views, although many believe such a body has a role to play as a forum for peace.

and thirdly, format, structure and agenda of the negotiations themselves.

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Madam Speaker, we have been discussing these issues intensively with the Northern Ireland parties and the Irish Government for some time now. I would have liked to have been in a position to announce agreement on these issues and to have been able to publish detailed proposals today. There are, however, still gaps to be filled in.

If I judge it would be helpful I may put forward to the parties, and perhaps publish, specific written proposals during the consultations. At the end of that period, the two Governments will review the outcome.

Whether or not final agreement on all issues can be reached during this period, let me make clear that at the end of it, the Government will put forward to this House legislative proposals for elections in Northern Ireland. Decisions on the other outstanding arrangements will also be announced. These decisions will be taken on the basis of a judgement of what is most likely to be broadly acceptable to the parties, and to the people of Northern Ireland. We have decided to act in this way to make clear that the process cannot be held up further if in the end there is still lack of agreement.

Madam Speaker, we are taking these decisions upon ourselves, together with the Irish Government where appropriate, because we do not believe that the overwhelming desire of the people of Northern Ireland for lasting peace will brook further delay. We are ready to fulfil our responsibilities.

There is one other aspect of the communiqué I should bring to the attention of the House - the suggestion that there could be referendums in Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. These could be held on the same day as the proposed election in Northern Ireland. The aim would be to give the people of Northern Ireland the opportunity to speak clearly about their own commitment to peaceful, democratic methods and rejection of violence.

The Government will consider with the parties whether such a referendum would be valuable or not. There is clearly room for debate about what the question or questions should be in such a

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referendum. But we will listen to the views of the parties and make our own views clear at the end of the consultation period.

Meanwhile, let there be no doubt about three points:

first, that there is no place whatsoever for violence or the threat of violence in the peace process or in the negotiations. Those who advocate violence or do not dissociate themselves clearly from its use or threat by others cannot expect others to go on sitting at the negotiating table with them. Senator Mitchell's Report sets out clear principles on democracy and non-violence, makes clear the priority to be attached to the decommissioning of illegal weapons and makes proposals on how this can be tackled. These issues, however difficult, cannot be dodged. They will be on the table at the beginning of negotiations. If it becomes clear that any party is not committed to these principles and this approach, either at the beginning of negotiations or subsequently, there will in our view be no place for them at the table.

the second point is that there has never been any justification for terrorism and violence in Northern Ireland. These proposals and the firm commitment to all-party negotiations by a fixed date will remove any lingering shred of obfuscation and pretence about this.

and thirdly, that the battle against terrorism is being intensified. Cooperation between us and the Irish Government has never been better. We will hunt down those responsible for bombings and killings and maintain security at whatever level it needs to be to protect the citizens of this country as they go about their daily business.

Madam Speaker, the people of this country and the Irish Republic have made clearer than ever before their demand for an end to violence. That demand must now be met and the people have the right to expect the violence to stop for good.

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The search for peace has been much complicated by the resumption of terrorism on 9 February. But the Government said it would not be deflected from its efforts and we have not been. I am grateful for the support we have received in our efforts from this House, across all the parties. We and the Irish Government are united in our determination to stamp out terrorism and bring lasting peace. With the support of this House I believe we will succeed.

But I warn the House that the road ahead may yet be long and stoney. The men of violence will not give up lightly. Among them are people who do not truly want peace as we understand it. As we go through the process leading to the negotiations and take the difficult decisions, concerns will be raised from this or that side, this or that interest. We will, of course, take account of all views, but we will not be deflected from our central objective. Because the men, women and children of Great Britain and Northern Ireland demand no less of us. It is their lives and their futures that must be our first concern.

Madam Speaker, I commend to the House this approach to negotiations and ultimately to a lasting and comprehensive peace.