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Reference Code: 2021/106/36

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TAOISEACH'S STATEMENT TO DÁIL ÉIREANN
WEDNESDAY, 28 FEBRUARY 1996

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

I wish to thank the House for affording me this opportunity to make this statement. I also wish to express my thanks to all those who made it possible - the Tánaiste, who has been working with tenacity and effectiveness on the Twin Track Initiative which commenced last November - and also to thank the members of the Cabinet Sub-Committee on Northern Ireland - the Minister for Social Welfare, the Minister for Justice, the Attorney General, and all our officials. Today's agreement would not have been possible without the agreement of 28 November which commenced the Twin Track Initiative, established a firm aim of launching all-party talks and gave us the immensely valuable and cogently written Mitchell Report.

The agreement reached in London today between Prime Minister Major and myself provides an historic opening for peace and reconciliation. It provides, for the first time a fixed date for all-party negotiations where all the parties in Northern Ireland, nationalist and republican, unionists and loyalist, get around the table with the two Governments and negotiate a way out of the difficulties that have divided us and brought us into conflict for generations.

There is, therefore, now no vestige of argument for the continuation of IRA violence, just as there has never been any moral or political justification for it. I call on the IRA to accept the will of the people of both of these islands, as so clearly expressed in recent days, to end the bombings and the shootings for once and for all.

Today's agreement gives everyone a chance to resolve their political differences by political means.

We have an opportunity, in the intensive period of consultations which the Tánaiste will be starting on Monday, to receive an input from all Northern Ireland political parties as to

- how they think an elective process should work;
- how negotiations should be conducted;

- whether there is advantage in a referendum to win popular endorsement for what we are doing.

I call on the Unionist parties to respond generously to this process. For our part we offer them generosity, in a way in which it has never been previously offered. There can be no agreement without them. Any agreement to come into effect must be approved in referendum by a majority in Northern Ireland. The majority community in Northern Ireland has the least to fear, and potentially the most to gain, from all-party negotiations. The Unionist community should not allow any artificial obstacle or sophisticated argument to stand in the way of their full hearted involvement in determining their own future.

This Government's primary objective, since taking office, has been to achieve a comprehensive political agreement which would allow the peoples of these islands to live and work together in peace and harmony.

We have been working intensely, in close co-operation with the British Government, to this end. We have worked, willingly and with due acknowledgement, on the achievements of our own predecessors in Government here.

In the period up to 9 February, when the IRA revoked its cessation of violence, a great deal of progress had been made.

The two Governments had, for the first time ever, provided -in the Joint Framework Document - an outline of what a comprehensive political agreement might involve, in order to give impetus, focus and direction to all-party negotiations.

We had also come a long way to making these negotiations a reality.

Last November, the two Governments agreed a joint firm aim of launching all-party negotiations by the end of this month.

We also put in place a process - the twin track process - to achieve this end.

It involved the beginning of intensive preparatory talks between the two Governments and the political parties to prepare the ground for negotiations. It also involved, in parallel, the setting up of an International Body, chaired by

Senator George Mitchell, to provide an independent assessment of the decommissioning issue.

The Body completed its work last month, within the timeframe allotted, and its Report, containing a number of principles and recommendations, dealt in a very balanced way with the complexities surrounding the decommissioning issue.

Very considerable progress was also made in the discussions in the political track, involving an unprecedented degree of contact between the two Governments, separately and together, and the political parties in Northern Ireland.

With a view to concluding the preparations for negotiations, the Irish Government had - on 7 February - made a proposal for proximity talks, which we were pursuing with the British Government with, we believed, a real prospect of success.

In short, it seemed as if all-party negotiations were within a hand's grasp.

The IRA's resumption of violence on 9 February, with all its terrible consequences in terms of loss of life and grievous injury and suffering, was a major blow to our hopes for real progress towards a political settlement.

However, the two Governments continued to work towards our shared objective of all-party negotiations. We recognised that we have a duty to act in the interests of all those - the vast majority of the peoples of these islands - who put their trust and confidence in us, and who look to us for political leadership. The pace of political progress can never be dictated by those who - against all morality and all logic - seek to set the political agenda by violence.

The priority of the Government in the past two weeks have been the restoration of the IRA ceasefire, and the establishment of a specific date for all-party negotiations on a settlement. We have regarded the latter objective as desirable and necessary in its own right, and also as helpful to the reinstatement of peace.

The Joint Communiqué which Prime Minister Major and I agreed in Downing Street today, represents a further milestone in this ongoing work, and provides, as I have already said, an historic opening for the peace and reconciliation which we all seek.

First, it reaffirms the commitment of the two Governments to work for a lasting peace and a comprehensive settlement based on the principles set out in the Downing Street Declaration and the Joint Framework Document.

Second, it underlines the fundamental priority which we attach to securing the earliest possible inclusive negotiations to address all the relevant relationships and issues in an inter-locking three-stranded process.

Third, it confirms that such negotiations should include all relevant parties which establish a commitment to exclusively peaceful methods and which have shown that they abide by the democratic process. There are no other qualifications for participation.

Fourth, it confirms that an elective process would have to be broadly acceptable and lead immediately and without further pre-conditions to the convening of all-party negotiations with a comprehensive agenda.

The Communiqué agreed between the British Prime Minister and myself is designed to move the entire peace process forward decisively. It creates a priceless opportunity to recapture the peace, and to anchor it politically.

For Sinn Féin and the IRA, this is a moment in time which may not be available to them soon again - if ever. All that has to happen, for Sinn Féin to become a full participant in the negotiations, is a restoration of the IRA ceasefire of August 1994. I know that every member of this House will join in the demand that the IRA should make Sinn Féin's participation possible - and that they should make that decision now.

I say to them openly and frankly: Do not close this space for hope. Build on the opportunity inherent in it. Take the next vital step in building a lasting peaceful settlement, by restoring the ceasefire of August 1994. That will then enable the two Governments to resume full Ministerial dialogue with Sinn Féin, and make possible that party's full engagement in the process of negotiations.

In paragraph 6 of the Communiqué, the Irish and British Governments have committed themselves irrevocably to the commencement of all-party negotiations on 10 June. It is made equally clear in paragraph 12 that, even in the absence of the cessation of violence, both Governments will continue to work in partnership with those parties which are exclusively committed to peaceful methods to secure a comprehensive negotiated settlement and will start negotiations with them on 10 June.

The intensive consultations and the elective process, now provided for, will be undertaken in the period between now and 10 June. Inclusive negotiations will then be convened to address comprehensively the agreed agenda in an interlocking three-stranded process.

During the ten day period beginning on Monday next, the two Governments will conduct intensive multi-lateral consultations with the relevant Northern Ireland parties. The purpose of these consultations will be:

First, to reach widespread agreement on proposals for a broadly acceptable elective process leading directly and without preconditions to the commencement of all-party negotiations on 10 June. While this is a matter primarily for the parties in Northern Ireland to determine by agreement with the British Government, the Irish Government would support a proposal of that kind which, to our satisfaction, met the three tests set out in the Mitchell Report.

The test of broad acceptability requires political acceptance. The test of an appropriate mandate demands that it offers a direct and speedy route, without preconditions, to all party negotiations. And the test of being within the three stranded structure requires that the integrity of the three core relationships as set out in both the Joint Declaration and the Joint Framework Document must be respected. In this morning's Communiqué, full and appropriate account has been taken of these conditions in paragraph 7 where it is stated that:

'The Prime Minister and the Taoiseach agreed that an elective process would have to be broadly acceptable and lead immediately and without further preconditions to the convening of all-party negotiations with a comprehensive agenda'.

The second purpose of the intensive consultations with the parties is to reach widespread agreement on the basis, participation, structure, format and agenda of substantive all-party negotiations.

On the basis for negotiations, it is made clear in paragraph 4 that neither violence, nor the threat of violence, would be allowed to influence the course of negotiations or preparations for them. Furthermore, in paragraph 6, the Prime Minister and I re-affirmed our commitment to work for a lasting peace and a comprehensive settlement on the basis of the fundamental principles shared by

our two Governments and set out in the Downing Street Declaration and the Joint Framework Document.

Regarding participation in all-party negotiations, both Governments are agreed in paragraph 5 that Sinn Féin participation is dependent only on a restoration of the IRA ceasefire. I regard it as being in all our interests that parties close to the loyalist paramilitaries, who have shown such discipline and courage in recent weeks, should be able to join with us in these negotiations.

On the question of how talks will be structured, much work remains to be done. While the practical considerations of this remain to be agreed, there is much to be built upon. The lessons of the 1991-92 talks and the issues identified in the Joint Framework Document offer signposts for the way forward. Of course, the structure for negotiations must be within the three-strand frame where all the key relationships are accorded equal integrity.

The format for negotiations is a matter on which each party will undoubtedly have its own view. The overriding objective here should be viability in order that the prospects for reaching a comprehensive agreement would be maximised within the shortest period possible.

On the question of the agenda for all-party negotiations, the British Prime Minister and I agree that it should be comprehensive. In that regard, I believe that the issues identified in the Joint Framework Document will be able to provide the necessary focus and direction for deliberations in this area.

The third purpose of the intensive multi-lateral consultations with the Northern Ireland parties relates to the question of the holding of parallel referendums, in Northern Ireland and in this jurisdiction. The objective of such referendums would be 'to mandate support for a process to create lasting stability, based on the repudiation of violence for any political purpose'. John Hume first proposed this as a means of solidly underpinning the search for, and outcome of, political negotiations by purely peaceful and democratic means. The idea has much to commend it because the people of Ireland, North and South, would in effect be asked to say that the invocation of violence can have no place in the resolution of differences. These can only be resolved by peaceful and democratic methods, where violence or its threat will have no part.

The British Prime Minister and I are confident that the consultations on all these matters, which will begin on Monday next, will offer a fair and acceptable basis for the launch of all-party negotiations. The Governments will review

the outcome in just over a fortnight's time and decisions will then be made to guarantee that the all-party negotiations will begin on time 10 June.

It is clear that the timespan just outlined for the intensive consultations with the Northern Ireland parties is very short. A determined and committed effort is required of everyone involved to ensure that the maximum progress is achieved.

There has been an emphasis in comment in West Minster and elsewhere on the problem of decommissioning. I understand this. But let us not forget that addressing the decommissioning of arms is one of the best means of building confidence and trust. We are putting in place a process in which decommissioning will become possible, as it is already desirable in every other sense. It is through the confidence and the trust that can only be built by political dialogue that we will make decommissioning practically achievable. That is a challenge for everybody. An important part of making that challenge a credible one is the clear recognition in the Communiqué that confidence building also requires that the parties have reassurance that a meaningful and inclusive process of negotiations is genuinely being offered to address the legitimate concerns of their traditions and the need for new political arrangements with which all can identify.

It is the intention of the British Prime Minister and myself that all our contacts and meetings will act as further steps on the road to the commencement of all-party talks. This morning's Communiqué represents an historic opening. Never before have we had the possibility of sitting down together to discuss all the issues that divide us. No one participant will determine the agenda, the format or conditions for participation. In the end, the peace that belongs to the people of Ireland must be underpinned by political agreement. After many twists and turns, we have crested a hill on the road to that agreement. The journey down the rest of the road starts now.