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**MITCHELL REPORT:
STATEMENT TO PARLIAMENT
24 JANUARY 1996**

With permission, Madam Speaker, I shall make a statement on the report of the International Body on the decommissioning of illegal arms which was published earlier today.

The key to progress in Northern Ireland is confidence - confidence to enable the parties to sit down together without threat of force. The retention of arms by the paramilitaries on both sides is the biggest single factor in holding back that confidence. It has so far prevented the holding of all-party talks.

That is one of the reasons why we and the Irish Government established the international body to provide an independent assessment of the decommissioning issue as one track of the Twin Tracks Initiative John Bruton and I launched last November.

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The Body's remit was to identify and advise on acceptable methods of verifiable decommissioning, and to report on the commitment of the paramilitaries to work constructively to achieve that. We set the Body the challenging target of reporting by mid-January. I am extremely grateful to Senator Mitchell and his colleagues for the energy and determination with which they have completed their task.

The Body's main conclusions are:

- that the total and verifiable disarmament of all paramilitary organisations has nearly universal support and must continue to be a principal objective.

- that to reach an agreed political settlement and take the gun out of politics, all parties should commit themselves to, and honour, six principles embodying the path of democracy and non-violence. These principles include

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- the total and verifiable disarmament of all paramilitary organisations,
 - the renunciation of force and the threat of force,
 - agreement to abide peacefully by whatever agreement is finally reached,
 - and an end to so-called punishment killings and beatings.
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- that there is a clear commitment on the part of those in possession of illegal arms to work constructively to achieve full and verifiable decommissioning as part of the process of all-party negotiations. The Body make a series of recommendations on the modalities of decommissioning of illegal arms. They emphatically declare that there is no equivalence between such arms and those held by the security forces. They rightly emphasise the need for independent verification.

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- that other confidence building measures are needed, such as an end to targeting of potential victims by the paramilitaries, information on missing persons and the return of those previously intimidated out of their homes.

The Body also record their conclusion, on the basis of their discussions, that the paramilitaries will not decommission any arms prior to all-party negotiations. The House will note that the Body did not conclude that they cannot decommission but that they will not. The House will draw its own conclusions. Although the Body make no formal recommendation on this point, they suggest an approach under which some decommissioning would take place during the process of all-party negotiations.

Madam Speaker, the Government welcome the Body's endorsement of the seriousness of the decommissioning issue. We welcome and fully endorse the six principles they set out. We call on all parties to do the same.

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If all concerned were to accept these principles, and honour them, as the International Body also rightly emphasise, that would be a significant step forward. Even more significant would be if, in addition, all parties, particularly Sinn Fein, also joined the two Governments in supporting the wide principles of consent set out in the Downing Street declaration.

The Government also welcome the Body's broad recommendations on the modalities of the decommissioning process. We are ready to implement them. It is now for those in possession of illegal arms to say whether they will accept and act on them. We look forward to an early and definitive response from the paramilitaries on both sides.

We welcome too the emphasis on other confidence-building measures. If the paramilitaries give up their present practice of keeping themselves ready for a return to action, that will be a most welcome sign of real commitment to peaceful methods. Otherwise gun-law continues to hang over the heads of the people of Northern Ireland.

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There is therefore much in the report we can welcome and endorse. But the practical problem remains: how to bring all the parties together. Self-evidently the best way to generate the necessary confidence is for the paramilitaries to make a start to the decommissioning process. We see no reason why they should not.

There can be no justification for the maintenance of private armies by those who claim to be committed to exclusively peaceful means. Opinion polls in both Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic have shown overwhelming public support in both communities for decommissioning before talks. We shall therefore keep up the pressure for an immediate start to this process.

However I am not prepared to accept that any one group should, through their intransigence, stand in the way of peace and a comprehensive settlement for the people of Northern Ireland. We will not be deflected from our aim. It is now apparent that there may well be another way forward, consistent with the basic principles we have always adhered to.

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One of the ~~confidence-building~~ measures taken up by the International Body is the idea of an election. The Body made clear that a broadly acceptable elective process, with an appropriate mandate and within the three-strand structure, could contribute to the building of confidence.

Madam Speaker, the Government believe that such an elective process offers a viable alternative direct route to the confidence necessary to bring about all-party negotiations. In this context it is possible to imagine decommissioning and such negotiations being taken forward in parallel.

The election proposal originated in Northern Ireland and, as recent opinion polls have shown, has widespread cross-community support there. A number of parties, including those led by the hon. Members for Upper Bann and North Antrim, as well as the Alliance Party, have put forward proposals for some form of elected body as a means of bringing all parties together, even if the paramilitaries persist in their refusal to decommission prior to negotiation.

It is true that other parties have registered their concerns. They will certainly need to be addressed. We will discuss urgently with all the parties how to overcome them. But in a democratic system like ours I cannot see how elections could be regarded by any of the parties as a side issue or as a block to progress.

As the Mitchell report says: "Elections held in accordance with democratic principles express and reflect the popular will". So let me make it quite clear to the House that we are ready to introduce legislation, and to seek both Houses' urgent approval for it, in order to allow an elective process to go ahead as soon as may be practicable. I would hope that this will attract support right across the House.

To sum up, Madam speaker, we believe that, in the light of the Mitchell report, there are two ways in which all-party negotiations can now be taken forward. Both are fully consistent with the six principles set out in the report.

The first is for the paramilitaries to make a start to decommissioning before all-party negotiations. They can - if they will. If not, the second is to secure a democratic mandate for all-party negotiations through elections specially for that purpose.

Two routes to all-party negotiations and to decommissioning. The choice between them is ultimately for the parties themselves. I believe that the people of Northern Ireland have every right to expect that one or other of these routes will be taken and taken soon.

For our part we, together with the Irish Government, will intensify our discussions with all the parties. I intend to meet the Taoiseach again in the middle of February to review progress.

Madam Speaker, the people of Northern Ireland are enjoying today's peace. They want it to be permanent. They also want and deserve political progress. It is time to put old enmities aside and to allow the people of Northern Ireland and their representatives once again to have a normal say in their future and their affairs.

The proposals I have put forward today require all concerned to take risks for peace. We have done so before and will do so again, consistent with our principles. That is what is needed if we are to build on the achievements of the past two years.

Let us never forget that we are dealing here with the lives of innocent men, women and children. We are dealing with their future and the future of Northern Ireland. In the end our obligation as politicians is to the people we govern.

I pledge that I will leave no stone unturned to deliver to the people of Northern Ireland on a permanent basis the precious privilege of peace they have now enjoyed for seventeen months.