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Reference Code: 2021/99/3

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**STATEMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER, MR TONY BLAIR,
HOUSE OF COMMONS, WEDNESDAY, 25 JUNE 1997
POLITICAL SETTLEMENT IN NORTHERN IRELAND**

Madam Speaker, with permission I shall make a statement about the Government's continuing search for peace and a political settlement in Northern Ireland.

In my speech in Belfast on 16 May, I set out the principles of this Government's approach:

- First, the primacy of the consent principle, to make clear that any settlement must command the consent of both Unionists and Nationalists and cannot be imposed on Northern Ireland against the wish of the majority of its people;
- Second, the need for urgent progress in the talks, in particular for the key political issues to be addressed as soon as possible;
- Third, the absolute unacceptability of violence or the threat of violence in the democratic process;
- Fourth, the desirability of talks involving all the parties, including Sinn Fein, if, but only if, there is an unequivocal IRA ceasefire;
- But fifth, the need to move on rapidly without Sinn Fein if not.

I want to move as rapidly as possible to an agreed political settlement. The situation in Northern Ireland means that delay is not acceptable. I also continue to believe that such a settlement must be one with which all the people of Northern Ireland can feel comfortable and to which they can give their allegiance. The outline of a settlement is clear. The key elements are:

- devolution in Northern Ireland, including an Assembly elected and operating on a widely acceptable basis;
- sensible cross-border arrangements between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic.

I believe there is a wide measure of agreement on these two elements, although there may be disagreement about the details.

There will also, of course, need to be new arrangements between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, including formal constitutional acceptance on both sides of the principle of consent and a new Anglo-Irish Agreement. These represent the three strands of the negotiations.

Madam Speaker, terrorism continues to haunt Northern Ireland. We were reminded of it again this morning, when only prompt RUC action averted another serious attack. Ten days ago, we saw the despicable murder by the IRA of RUC constables John Graham and David

Johnston. Five more young children without fathers. The whole House will join me in condemnation of this pointless and cowardly crime. Those responsible deserve our contempt in equal measure to the sympathy we feel for the families and their colleagues. We will do everything in our power to bring those responsible to justice.

But, Madam Speaker, this was worse than just another terrorist crime. The location and timing of the murders, close to one of the most sensitive areas for marches, can only be seen as deliberately provocative.

But it was worse than that, too. Let me explain to the House why.

I announced in my Belfast speech that officials could meet Sinn Fein to ensure that there was no misunderstanding of our position, and to hear Sinn Fein's response to my statement that the settlement train was leaving, with or without them. This initiative was widely welcomed. Two meetings were held.

Following the second meeting, to make our position absolutely clear and to remove any shred of justification for claims that it was not, I authorised the sending of an aide memoire to Sinn Fein to put in writing the Government's position on the points where Sinn Fein had sought clarification. The aide memoire was passed to Sinn Fein on Friday evening, 13 June, three days before the Lurgan murders. I have placed a copy in the library of the House.

It set out clearly and concisely the Government's position on confidence-building measures, decommissioning and how long we think the talks should last. It also repeated that Sinn Fein's entry into talks required an unequivocal ceasefire, and that a period of time would be needed to ensure that this was genuine and that words and deeds matched. In order to put at rest fears that the Government might seek to spin out this process, it added that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland would come to a political judgement about Sinn Fein's qualification for entry in some six weeks. Assuming words and deeds were consistent with a genuine and unequivocal ceasefire, Sinn Fein would at that point be invited to join a plenary session of the talks. They would then need to make clear, as the other participants have done, their absolute commitment to the Mitchell principles.

This aide memoire represented a reasonable approach, which had the full support of the American and Irish governments, although the text of the aide memoire was entirely our own.

Then came the appalling murders in Lurgan. These caused revulsion and outrage not just in this country but right across the world. That was clear to me in the US, where President Clinton condemned the cold-blooded killings in exactly the same terms as I did. It was clear, too, in my discussions with the outgoing Taoiseach, Mr Bruton. The credibility gap the IRA and Sinn Fein have to bridge is wider than ever after Lurgan.

Whatever Sinn Fein now say or do, I am determined to move on. It is essential to make political progress rapidly. The preparation for substantive talks must quicken.

Last Autumn, we and the Irish government, building on the discussions in the talks, began to develop a comprehensive set of proposals for the handling of decommissioning. Final

agreement was reached on them earlier this week. The two governments have today given these proposals to the Independent Chairman of the talks, Senator George Mitchell, for circulation to the parties involved in the talks; and will be commending these proposals to the other participants as a basis for agreement on this important and complex subject. A copy has been put in the library of the House.

Briefly, we propose the establishment of an Independent Commission, to make proposals for decommissioning and to monitor its implementation; and a Committee of the Plenary to deal with these issues, with a sub-Committee specifically on decommissioning.

The two governments are fully committed to the approach to decommissioning set out in the report of the International Body. This recommended, and I quote: 'an approach under which some decommissioning would take place during the negotiations.' The report foresaw mutual progress on decommissioning and substantive political issues leading to a progressive pattern of mounting trust and confidence. That is what the two governments want to see. Under our proposals, a plenary meeting should be convened every two months to enable all participants to review progress across the entire spectrum of the negotiations including decommissioning, and to consider whether the necessary confidence is being maintained. All participants, including Sinn Fein if they are there, will of course have already committed themselves to the Mitchell Principles. These include not only the total disarmament of all paramilitary organisations and the renunciation of force, or the threat of force, but also action to prevent so-called punishment killings and beatings.

Madam Speaker, a second sub-committee will deal with other confidence-building measures set out in the Mitchell Report. There can be no question of trading guns for political concessions in all this. There will need to be genuine progress in both decommissioning and the political negotiations if the process is to be successful. All the parties in the talks will have to face up to their responsibilities.

If the proposals provide a basis for agreement, important preparatory work can take place over the Summer. It will be crucial to put the machinery in place as soon as possible, in particular the Independent Commission. I appeal to all the parties to look at the proposals in a constructive spirit. I do not believe there is another way forward.

Agreement would at last clear the way for substantive talks to start in earnest. I want them to begin as quickly as possible. I am determined that, so far as we can influence the process, the talks will move as fast as possible. I can therefore announce today for the first time a clear timetable. The substantive talks should start in early September at the latest. In my view they should also conclude by next May at the latest, when the legislative basis for the talks expires. That is an ambitious target, but I have no doubt it is achievable if all concerned put their minds fully to it.

As I said at the beginning of my statement, there is broad agreement on the key elements of a settlement: devolved and fair government in Northern Ireland, sensible and significant North-South arrangements, and a revamped relationship between the two governments. The outlines of a settlement are reasonably clear, even if many of the details will be fiercely fought over. Let us now get down to the substance without further ado or prevarication.

And let me also repeat, in case anyone still has a doubt. Any agreement will be put to a referendum of all the people of Northern Ireland, as well as to Parliament. So the triple lock is secure.

There is no time to waste. The situation on the ground in Northern Ireland is fragile. Everyone is conscious of the dangers of the forthcoming marching season. No-one wants to see a repetition of last year's dreadful events. Here, too, the Government are determined to act. As the North report said, the best way to balance the conflict of rights and responsibilities involved in disputed marches is through local accommodation.

The Government is absolutely committed to doing everything it can to encourage a local accommodation at Drumcree, as elsewhere, to take account of the legitimate concerns of all sides. Accordingly, the Secretary of State is today issuing invitations to discussions with the Orange Order and the Garvaghy Road residents at Hillsborough Castle on Friday. Nobody will be forced to talk face-to-face with those they do not wish to, but my Right Honourable Friend will make a further determined effort to make progress. I appeal to all concerned to accept this invitation to talks. Accommodation need not be a dirty word where human lives may be at stake.

This morning I met the 12-year-old girl, Margaret Gibney, who wrote to me and to other public figures, urging us to commit ourselves to bringing about peace in Northern Ireland.

I owe it to her, and this House owes it to her, and all who have influence and authority owe it to her, to put a stop to the killing and to put in place a lasting political settlement. She has enjoyed one year of peace in the whole of her life. When her children are born, I want every year of their lives to be a year of peace.

So, Madam Speaker, this process has to get moving. The settlement train is leaving, with or without Sinn Fein. If they want to join, it is absolutely clear what they have to do. I have dealt straight with them. I expect straight dealing in return. We and the other parties will not be waiting around for them.

There are, of course, risks in the approach we are taking. No lasting settlement can be arrived at without taking some risks. But I have no doubt the measures we have put in place are right. They provide the basis for a way forward and a settlement within a matter of months. That is what the people of Northern Ireland want, need and deserve.