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Statement by the Taoiseach**23 May 1998**

The people have spoken.

I want to give a heartfelt thanks to all of those on the island as a whole who, by their collective act of endorsement, have given the Good Friday Agreement life.

Over 71% of voters in the North and close to 95% in the South - 85% of all those voting on the island of Ireland - have bestowed on it not just political force but true moral force. There is now no greater claim to authority, no greater claim to legitimacy, than the collective voice of the people recorded today.

It behoves everyone to accept the people's verdict. They have endorsed the Good Friday Agreement as the only legitimate charter to guide and direct our efforts now and for the future as we seek to build a new agreed Ireland, North and South.

The voice of the people, spoken by the living representatives of the two great traditions of this island, has redefined Ireland. Their collective verdict transcends not just the Anglo-Irish Agreement but the whole 1920-21 settlement. The all-Ireland vote, the first since 1918, has infused De Valera's constitutional vision with a new authority appropriate to the challenges and opportunities offered to us now at the close of one century and the opening of another.

The decision of the people of Ireland, nationalist and unionist, to endorse the Good Friday Agreement represents an historic watershed between a past riven by political division and a new future based on mutual respect, concord and agreement.

Their endorsement allows us all to approach the new millennium with hope and optimism that we have bridged the divisions of the past and that we can now begin the work of building true and lasting peace and prosperity together on this island.

I want to pay tribute to the peace-builders who made this historic decision possible.

To John Hume - statesman of the troubles and now statesman of peace whose guiding vision so informs and shapes this Agreement.

To David Trimble - a man of tremendous moral courage and conviction, who saw a brighter, safer future for all the people of Northern Ireland and who has fought so successfully to bring that vision to life.

To Prime Minister Tony Blair - who has given of himself and has put his heart and soul into the search for peace. A true and inspirational peace builder who deserves our profoundest gratitude.

To President Clinton, our supporter and counsellor who brought the authority of his office and his personal commitment to the peace process when it seemed an unlikely gamble. A man who saw a chance to help the land of his ancestors and who has helped more than he knows. I look forward to an early opportunity of personally thanking him.

To Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness and all those in the republican movement who have striven to beat swords into ploughshares. They have

travelled a long journey and overcome many hurdles. I salute their efforts to end the violence and to bring peace and harmony to the people of Ireland as a whole.

And I want to thank all party leaders, North and South, and those peace builders whose names will be forever associated with the process of engagement and negotiation that led to the Good Friday Agreement - Charles Haughey who launched the Anglo-Irish process in 1980, Albert Reynolds who did so much to lay the foundation stones for today's outcome, Dick Spring, John Bruton and all Irish political leaders who sustained the search for peace and stability. And to those who worked so hard and creatively on a daily basis, David Andrews and Mo Mowlam and their colleagues Liz O'Donnell and Paul Murphy.

I want to pay a particular thanks to Senator George Mitchell, General de Chastelain and Prime Minister Harri Holkeri. Their contribution to this peace Agreement has been outstanding.

There are hurdles ahead. The debate leading to this historic decision clearly showed that a number of issues give rise to deep and abiding concerns. But as these issues are worked out and as the institutions and processes of this Agreement are brought to life, I hope and anticipate that those who have demonstrated their concerns by voting NO will be reassured and will come to appreciate the true potential of the Agreement to bring about peace and stability.

The decision of the people to endorse this Agreement was not simply a political act. It was a command to all political leaders to begin the work of peace. The elections to the Assembly on 25 June are the first step in that process. I hope that those parties who opposed the Agreement will now abide, in the true spirit of

democracy, with the verdict of the people.

To those who would contemplate engaging in violent opposition to this Agreement and what it presents, I would say this. Forget it. The people - on whose behalf you claim to act - have spoken. Your ways are the ways of the past. If you cannot join us in the new enterprise that offers the only true partnership and reconciliation amongst the people of this island, then desist and return to the obscurity you deserve.

Other serious challenges lie ahead. The marching season is an obvious point of anxiety given the events of recent years. But I believe that the spirit of the Agreement should inform the approach of all those most directly involved in such contentious issues. This Agreement is about sharing space. It is about creating agreed structures around that shared space to resolve the issues that arise in any society.

We must now proceed to the business at hand of implementing the Agreement. It and all its provisions must and will be fully implemented. The Agreement is an integrated package, a carefully balanced process of both consolidation and change.

It is the real business of politics.

And because of the peoples' endorsement of the Good Friday Agreement, what we do, we do in the name of the people and in the name of those for whom they have spoken - the new generations who will find what they have always deserved - an island and a people at peace.