

NORTHERN IRELAND ELECTIVE PROCESS

With permission, Madam Speaker, I shall make a statement on the arrangements leading to all-party negotiations in Northern Ireland.

In my statement to the House of 28 February, I announced that all-party negotiations would commence on 10 June. In a communiqué issued on the same day, the British and Irish Governments also agreed on intensive multilateral consultations with the Northern Ireland parties. The purpose of these was to help the British Government draw up proposals for a broadly acceptable elective process, including the possibility of a referendum, and to try to reach agreement on the format and agenda of all-party negotiations.

In the course of these consultations, the Government has met all the major parties and most minor parties in Northern Ireland on several occasions. Sinn Fein have of course excluded themselves. There have been several meetings between the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the Tanaiste, Mr Spring, including a review of the outcome of the consultations. The Irish government has also had a number of meetings with the Northern Ireland parties.

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In some areas, we have seen encouraging signs of convergence between the parties' views. In others, sharp differences have remained. The form of elections has been one of the main areas of disagreement between the parties.

I made clear in my statement on 28 February that, if no agreement proved possible, the Government would come forward with

Three main systems have been proposed:

- an election in eighteen constituencies each electing 5 members by Single Transferable Vote;

- an election on a party list system across one single Northern Ireland constituency;

Madam Speaker, we have therefore considered how to proceed.

- and a single constituency election across Northern Ireland with votes for parties but not for named candidates.

We have decided to propose a new system of broad attractive elements of the new system. We will introduce legislation, immediately after the Easter recess, providing for an election on 30 May using a list system rather than individual candidates, organised in eighteen constituencies but not by Single

Transferable Vote and parties. None of these systems has secured the clear support of major parties representing each of the main communities. Some parties have even threatened not to participate in the process and thus abort

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the possibility of all-party negotiations should one of the other systems be chosen.

I made clear in my statement on 28 February that, if no agreement proved possible, the Government would come forward with proposals based on a judgement of what is most likely to be broadly acceptable to the parties, and to the people of Northern Ireland. Whatever the merits of each of the three main systems, it is clear that none on its own meets this criterion of broad acceptability.

Madam Speaker, we have therefore considered how to proceed. We have decided to propose a new system, including the most attractive elements of other proposals. We will therefore introduce legislation, immediately after the Easter recess, providing for an election on 30 May using a list system rather than individual candidates, organised in eighteen constituencies but not by Single Transferable Vote, and supplemented by Northern Ireland-wide party preference.

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Briefly, electors will have to register just one vote which they will cast for the party of their choice. Five seats in each of the eighteen constituencies will be allocated from party constituency lists of candidates, published in advance, in proportion to each party's share of the vote. In addition, the votes in all the constituencies will be aggregated and the ten most successful parties across the whole of Northern Ireland will secure two elected representatives each, from party lists published in advance.

I believe this is a fair and balanced system that will produce a representative outcome. The province-wide element should help achieve the widely shared objective of making the negotiating process as inclusive as possible through representation of the smaller parties.

These elections will create a pool of 110 elected representatives. The successful parties will be invited by the Secretary of State to select from among their representatives negotiating teams for the negotiations to begin on 10 June. The transition from the elections to the negotiations will be automatic and immediate.

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Our aim is to see inclusive negotiations. Sinn Fein have, however, currently excluded themselves from negotiations by the ending of the IRA ceasefire. That is their choice. But they can make themselves eligible to participate through the unequivocal restoration of the ceasefire. That, too, is their choice.

The Forum will not engage in the negotiations, which will be free-standing, but could interact with and inform the process at the

These negotiations need to take place in an atmosphere of confidence. As I told the House on 28 February, all parties will need to make clear at the beginning of negotiations their total and absolute commitment to the principles of democracy and non-violence set out in the Mitchell report and to address, also at the beginning of negotiations, Senator Mitchell's proposals on decommissioning. There can be no backing away from this.

The Forum's life will be time limited to twelve months, renewable for up to a maximum of a further twelve months. It will not

Equally there must be confidence that, as the negotiations proceed, they will be comprehensive and address all legitimate issues.

As well as furnishing negotiating teams, the elected representatives will be members of an elected Forum to meet in Belfast on a

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regular basis when negotiations are not in session. The purpose of discussion in this Forum will be to promote dialogue and mutual understanding within Northern Ireland.

The Forum will not engage in the negotiations, which will be free-standing, but could interact with and inform the process at the request of the participants in negotiations. For example the negotiators might agree to commission discussions, studies or reports from the Forum. The legislation will also provide for the Forum to be able to conduct hearings at which public submissions by relevant bodies or individuals can be made.

The Forum's life will be time limited to twelve months, renewable for up to a maximum of a further twelve months. It will not continue in existence if negotiations are no longer in process. In its procedures, it will be required to proceed by broad consensus.

Madam Speaker, we have also looked at proposals for referenda. We agree that the people of Northern Ireland must have full

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ownership of the negotiation process and its outcome. The electoral legislation will give the Government powers to hold referenda in Northern Ireland. This will enable us to meet our undertaking to put the outcome of negotiations to the people of Northern Ireland before submitting it to Parliament.

It has also been argued that a referendum now could be valuable, for example on the use of violence for political ends. Our judgement at present is that the case for such a referendum has not yet been conclusively made. But we have not ruled out the option of holding a referendum with an appropriate question or questions on the same day as the elections.

Madam Speaker, there is one other important area which needs to be settled before negotiations can begin, namely the ground rules for these negotiations. At the end of last week, a consultation paper was issued to the parties. This paper sets out what an acceptable approach might be, drawing on the experience of the 1991-92 talks round and preliminary consultations with the parties. Further consultations with the parties will continue to ensure that the maximum common ground can be identified.

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Madam Speaker, I have outlined today what I believe to be a viable and reasonable way forward. Everyone in this process has had to make compromises, some of them difficult ones. Everyone has needed to exercise patience. I am grateful for that. But the basis of our approach has remained unchanged, namely the principles of democracy and non violence set out in the Downing Street Declaration, and the need for an approach which can build confidence and lead to an agreement capable of winning the allegiance of both main communities.

I therefore urge the Northern Ireland parties to look carefully at the announcements I have made today, and the short paper giving more detail which we are publishing in parallel. No party has got all it wanted. Equally I see no issue of principle here which could reasonably cause any party to walk away from the democratic process I have set out. I do not believe the people of Northern Ireland would understand if any party did.

Madam Speaker, let us also not forget that the threat of terrorism continues to hang over this process. That is why the Mitchell

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principles of democracy and non-violence, and parallel decommissioning, remain so important.

The IRA used the lack of a fixed date for all party negotiations as an excuse to break their ceasefire. There was never any justification for their actions. Now their excuses are running out. What I have set out today represents a clear and direct route to all-party negotiations. The prospects for a just and lasting settlement are better than they have been for a generation if all parties take advantage of the opportunities now before us.

But let me make clear yet again that, while we want to see all parties round the table, the process will go on with or without Sinn Fein. If they exclude themselves from taking part in democratic negotiations, they will not be able to exercise a veto against others doing so.

Madam Speaker, once again the people of Northern Ireland are watching the latest steps along the road to negotiations with bated

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breath. Their hopes for peace could not be clearer or more overwhelming. We need to move beyond procedures to the substance of negotiations as soon as we can. The chance is there: no-one who stands unreasonably in the way of a settlement will be readily forgiven.

I therefore commend to the House the approach I have set out, and hope that the House will today send a clear signal of support for this democratic process. That would be the best answer to the terrorists who continue to threaten it.