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I want to see peace in Northern Ireland - soon. So do the people of Northern Ireland. The road to an agreed and lasting settlement has been, and will continue to be, long and painstaking.

The last few months have seen encouraging progress. The all-party talks starting on 10 June are the first substantive negotiations since 1992. Meanwhile all the major parties, and many smaller ones, will take part in the elections in Northern Ireland on 30 May. The elections will prepare the way for the talks through the mandate to negotiate they give to the elected representatives. Each successful party will choose its negotiating team from among its representatives. All the elected representatives will also be eligible to sit in a Forum designed to promote dialogue and mutual understanding. The Forum cannot determine the course of the negotiations but can make an important contribution in promoting dialogue between the parties and stimulating wider public involvement.

These new moves reflect the overwhelming desire for peace of all the people of Northern Ireland, and their determination to preserve the new quality of life they have enjoyed since August 1994, when the IRA declared their ceasefire. They want to build on the huge progress made in Northern Ireland in recent years: higher economic and social standards, new investment and jobs, fairer treatment in the workplace and elsewhere.

These elections give the people of Northern Ireland a unique chance to vote for peace and make sure their views are known. I hope that as many as possible, from all sides of the community, will take this chance. It is an opportunity to embrace negotiation and reject violence once and for all. Much has been made of the apparent complexity of the electoral system. But each voter only has to



- 2 -

place one cross against the party of his choice. Nothing could be easier or simpler in practice. It will be a vote for democracy and negotiation.

Once the elections are over, the route to the negotiations is clear, direct and automatic. And let me be absolutely clear about the British Government's intention to ensure that these negotiations will be a genuine and serious effort to reach a comprehensive settlement, covering all the issues of concern and acceptable to all concerned. The purpose of the negotiations is arrangements for the future government of Northern Ireland, within a framework of stable relationships within the island of Ireland and between the peoples of these islands, which can command the widest possible acceptability, accommodate diversity and provide for the necessary mutual reconciliation. For our part, the British Government is committed to putting into effect whatever is agreed at the negotiations, provided it is endorsed by the people of Northern Ireland by way of a referendum.

What are the prospects for these negotiations? The British Government will work unremittingly to make a success of them. But much depends on the parties themselves. No party can dictate what a settlement will look like. No party can expect to get all it wants. All parties need to be committed to making a success of the negotiations and to persisting with them even when the going gets tough. Readiness to compromise will be essential on the part of all concerned.

If the negotiations are approached in this spirit, as they will be by us, I am confident about the prospects for success. It is clear that, whatever the differences between the two political traditions in Northern Ireland, the gap is by no means unbridgeable. The shape of an eventual settlement can occasionally be glimpsed behind the sound and fury of the parties. The task is



- 3 -

to turn this glimpse into reality.

But there is a huge shadow over this prospect - the shadow of paramilitary violence, and in particular the shadow of the breakdown of the IRA ceasefire, and the violence since then.

The British and Irish Governments have made absolutely clear that they want all the parties in Northern Ireland to be at the negotiations. But they have made it just as clear that, without an unequivocal restoration of the IRA ceasefire, Sinn Fein cannot take their place in the negotiations. The point is simple. All the participants in the negotiations must be able to show their commitment to exclusively peaceful means and to the democratic process. Sinn Fein cannot do so with any credibility if the organisation with which they are linked is continuing violence.

John Bruton's speech in Finglas a couple of weeks ago spelled out how the two Governments have worked to ensure a genuine process of negotiation, and set out the reasons for Sinn Fein and the IRA to follow peaceful, democratic means.

I endorse in particular the call he made in that speech for a renewed ceasefire. I want Sinn Fein to be part of the negotiations. They have an important contribution to make. But they cannot make it while there is no IRA ceasefire in place. The talks will in any event go ahead. And it must be in the interests of all parties, and the voters they represent, to make their own case.

I said that I was confident that the negotiations could succeed. But confidence is an ingredient sadly lacking between the parties themselves. On the Nationalist side, confidence is needed that a meaningful and inclusive process of



- 4 -

negotiations is on offer. The British Government have sought to build that confidence. The agenda is open. All parties will be treated equally in the negotiations. No-one can be forced to agree against their will. No outcome to the talks is pre-determined. No-one wants to drag out the process.

But confidence is also needed that the paramilitaries will not seek to use or threaten force if they cannot get their way at the negotiating table. The Unionists in particular need to have this confidence. That is why the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons, as called for by the Mitchell Report, remains so important. The British and Irish Governments have agreed that all the participants in the negotiations will have to make clear at the beginning of the talks their total and absolute commitment to the principles of democracy and non-violence set out in the Mitchell Report. Decommissioning will also need to be addressed at the beginning of the talks and agreement reached on how Mitchell's recommendations on decommissioning can be taken forward, without blocking the negotiations.

This is a formidable challenge among many other formidable challenges. But, like the others, I believe it can be met. The objective is a negotiated settlement. We have taken risks before in search of this objective. We shall do so again. Let no-one doubt our continuing commitment. But we also need a willingness among all the Northern Ireland parties to engage in genuine, open dialogue with each other, and readiness to reach the compromises that will be necessary to move forward.

Both British and Irish Governments have a vital role to play in making peace and a negotiated settlement in Northern Ireland possible. That we share so much in common culturally and politically, not least our fundamental commitment to democracy and its values, makes the task easier. The prize is



- 5 -

great: a prosperous and peaceful future for the people of Northern Ireland, and  
for all the people of these islands. We must not let the opportunity slip now.