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STATEMENT BY SENATOR GEORGE J. MITCHELL

CONCLUDING REMARKS OF THE CHAIRMAN IN PLENARY SESSION, 24 SEPTEMBER 1997

It's taken so long and been so difficult that I sometimes wondered whether we'd ever actually get to this point. But we've finally completed the preliminary agenda, and for that full credit goes to you, the participants in this process.

The two Government's have been steadfast in purpose, unrelenting in effort. The political parties here have disagreed on many issues; but they've been united in the objective of moving this process forward. My two colleagues have been indispensable.

It does not diminish the magnitude of what has been accomplished to acknowledge the even greater difficulties that lie ahead. They don't involve rules of procedure or preliminary agendas. They involve the ultimately critical issues of how the people of Northern Ireland can live together, in peace and with reconciliation.

Each of us has a stake in the outcome of this process. But the largest stake is held by those not present: the people of Northern Ireland; your constituents, your fellow citizens, your families. What kind of life they will have is, to a large extent, up to you.

It has been two and a half years since I first set foot in Northern Ireland. I have come to know, admire and like the people here. I have also come to respect each of you.

I spent nearly 15 years as a United States Senator, six of them as the Majority Leader. I know well the demands on those who lead in democratic societies: the never-ending tensions between individual conscience and collective responsibility; between the demands of a constituency and those of the larger society; the simple, human conflict between duty to family and duty to public office.

And yet, with all I've been through, I've never been through anything as personally difficult as what you've lived with your entire political lives. That you have stayed at it, kept moving forward in the face of personal risk to yourselves and your families, and of a seemingly endless series of obstacles and disruptions, is a testament to your seriousness of purpose and your perseverance.

You will need all of that, and more, in the coming months. We all will.

But what must sustain us is the importance, even the greatness, of our objective. It should be both inspiring and humbling to realize that in your hands are the lives and futures of the people of Northern Ireland.

For most human beings life is essentially a never-ending quest for respect; first, self-respect and then the respect of others. There is no surer or more meaningful way to earn that respect than through service to others.

You will earn the respect of your fellow citizens, and their gratitude, when you successfully conclude these negotiations. And you will deserve it, because you will have done what no one has been able to do for hundreds of years: bring lasting peace, political stability and reconciliation to Northern Ireland.

My colleagues and I look forward to working with you
to achieve that noble goal.