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STATEMENT BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE TO THE PLENARY
SESSION OF THE MULTI-PARTY TALKS AT CASTLE BUILDINGS, ON
TUESDAY 3 JUNE 1997

It is a personal privilege to be here today as these multi-party talks reconvene. I have of course followed the talks closely over the last year, and I welcome the opportunity that I now have to be able to contribute to the process. In doing so I would wish to pay tribute to my predecessor's own contributions to these talks; Patrick Mayhew and Michael Ancram both devoted great effort and personal commitment to the search for a political settlement in Northern Ireland. I believe that we now have the chance to re-start negotiations with fresh impetus and a renewed sense of purpose and determination. As long as we all have the necessary vision and courage, the way is open to overcome the obstacles and make real progress towards our objectives.

I want to acknowledge the work of you as participants too - I recognise you have endured many frustrations in pursuing your different goals.

I would like to thank nearly everyone in this room who has wished me well both in health and political terms. I know this honeymoon won't last and that there will be many criticisms but I hope these will be directed at me and not at my officials.

The Government's overriding objective is to reach a comprehensive, lasting political settlement which has the broad support of all parts of the community in Northern Ireland. The Prime Minister has made clear his own personal commitment to achieving this objective. I too am determined to do all I can to work with others to the same end.

Any outcome of these talks must be comprehensive and widely acceptable. We stand by the commitments to the triple-lock mechanism, whereby any settlement would need to be agreed by the participants in

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the talks, approved in a referendum in Northern Ireland and finally endorsed by Parliament through the enactment of the relevant legislation.

I appreciate - and share - the deep frustration felt by many that progress since last June has not been as great as any of us would have hoped, and that it has not yet proved possible to address the political issues which lie at the heart of this process. But some important progress has been made - and should not be underestimated - in laying the foundations upon which we must now build.

The item currently requiring resolution is the important and sensitive issue of decommissioning. Only once this has been resolved, to the satisfaction of the participants, can the talks proceed to endorse proposals for the agenda and launch the three strands of political negotiation.

I do not underestimate the difficulty of resolving the issue of decommissioning but I want to say two things about it.

First, the issue must be resolved soon. If the settlement train is to begin to move, we must reach an agreed position on decommissioning first.

And if the talks do not move on to the substantive issues in the near future they will lose credibility and we will defer - and perhaps lose - the best opportunity for a generation of securing a widely acceptable political accommodation. I want to see the launch of the substantive political negotiations within a matter of weeks. We all want to see lasting political stability in Northern Ireland: the quickening pace of constitutional reform throughout the rest of the United Kingdom provides a positive context in which to make real progress; we must pick up the necessary momentum now.

Second, I want to underline the fact that the Government is determined to facilitate the necessary agreement on the issue of decommissioning. The

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participants have deeply held, conflicting views on the subject but I am confident that there is a basis on which agreement could be reached. The two Governments and the other participants, with the assistance of yourself and your colleagues, Mr Chairman, can I believe find a way through.

It is our firm belief that the talks process begun here last June offers the best chance of securing such a political settlement addressing the concerns of all the participants. The talks should be all-inclusive. We have made it clear that we would like to see Sinn Fein joining the negotiations. But we have made it equally clear that we stand by the conditions for Sinn Fein's entry to the talks agreed by the two Governments and laid down in statute. If Sinn Fein want to join the talks there must be an unequivocal restoration of the IRA ceasefire, demonstrated, as I have said many times before, in word and deed. This must be backed up by a clear commitment to democratic principles.

With this in mind, the Prime Minister has authorised exploratory meetings between officials and Sinn Fein. There have been two such meetings and, subject to events on the ground, there could be another. If there is a ceasefire, there will be no unnecessary delay in Sinn Fein taking their place at this table. But if the republican movement fails to grasp this opportunity, the talks process will proceed without Sinn Fein. The ball is in their court.

Of course, we must not lose sight of the wider issues facing us in Northern Ireland. We want these talks to take place in a climate of peace and reconciliation. I abhor the continuing terrorist violence, and in particular the tragic fact that four men have died in past weeks as a direct result of sectarianism and thuggery. I condemn unreservedly the brutal murders of Robert Hamill, Darren Bradshaw, Sean Brown and Gregory Taylor. I also wholeheartedly condemn the arson attacks on

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churches and halls and harassment of churchgoers attending their place of worship, such as the protest outside the Roman Catholic church at Harryville. There is no justification for such action..

The Government will do all it can to deal with terrorism from whatever source. I fully share the concern expressed by many about recent terrorist attacks that have been attributed to loyalist extremists and about the recent emergence and development of the Loyalist Volunteer Force. The ceasefire announcement by the so called Combined Loyalist Military Command is still formally in place and, as the Prime Minister has said, that signal of restraint - so far as it goes - is welcome. But the words of any ceasefire declaration are meaningless unless reflected in deeds on the ground.

Total and absolute commitment the six principles set out in paragraph 20 of the report of the International Body is an absolute requirement for participation in these negotiations. If on a rounded political judgement we felt that any party here had demonstrably dishonoured its commitment to those principles we would not hesitate to take the appropriate action. The Government will continue to monitor the situation carefully. We again urge all those with particular influence on the Loyalist community to redouble their efforts in urging restraint.

Those of us who hold positions of influence, whether in Government or as representatives of political parties, have a duty to use that influence responsibly and to set an example to those whose words and actions threaten the progress we are trying to make towards peace and political stability. In particular, as we enter this potentially difficult marching period over the summer months, we must all encourage a spirit of co-operation to all concerned.

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I also want to express my deepest gratitude to you, Mr Chairman, and your colleagues and staff, for your continuing chairmanship of these talks. I am sure that I echo the thoughts of all those around this table in expressing my appreciation for the time, effort and personal commitment you have all given to this process. We are greatly reassured and relieved that you are here for the resumption of the talks.

In concluding these comments, Mr Chairman, I would like to encourage all the participants here to take the opportunity we now have to make real and early progress towards an honourable settlement. I can assure you of this Government's continuing commitment to work very closely with the Chairmen, the Irish Government and all the parties to achieve that aim.