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S OF S PRIVATE OFFICE 1712106722

No. 5733 P. 2/18

**FORUM REACTIVATION ORDER:
DRAFT SPEECH FOR THE SECRETARY OF STATE**

I beg to move that the draft Northern Ireland (Entry to Negotiations, etc) Act 1996 (Revival of Section 3) Order 1997, which was laid before this House on 15 May, be approved.

Madam Speaker, before I move on to the substance of my comments, might I first welcome to his place the current, temporary Conservative Spokesman on Northern Ireland. In the previous Parliament, we maintained a bipartisan approach over policy on Northern Ireland, and I hope very much that we shall be able to do so in this Parliament. I look forward to any views he might express on this subject.

Can I also, among the many new members in this House, welcome particularly those from Northern Ireland, the Honourable Member for Lagan Valley Mr Donaldson, who replaces the much-missed Sir James Molyneaux, from whom, fortunately, we shall be able to hear in the future in the House of Lords; and the Honourable Member for West Tyrone Mr William Thompson. We look forward very much to working with them both.

Meanwhile, the House will be a different place without the presence of Rev William McCrea. Dr Joe Hendron will also be missed - I know he has left many friends in the House. And it is right that I pay tribute to one other absent face, that of Sir Patrick Mayhew, who will also be found in another place. He worked, with a dedication that would have brought many

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others close to exhaustion, for the interests of Northern Ireland as he saw them; and he did so without any hope of personal advantage, knowing that the position of Secretary of State was likely to be his last in Government. I believe Northern Ireland owes him a great debt, it was under his stewardship that the Downing Street Declaration and the Framework documents were agreed, two milestones on the path to where we are today.

Madam Speaker, we are reviving the forum now because the Talks, which are the centre piece of the process, are to re-open tomorrow. So let me first consider the process as a whole.

The Talks first met last June, the Forum following several days later. High hopes rode on the process. Had Northern Ireland really turned a corner? For some the answer was no - and had been since the IRA ceasefire tragically and cruelly ended in February last year. That view was compounded just a few days after the talks started when the IRA planted a bomb which devastated the centre of Manchester. But, to many people in Northern Ireland, the talks nevertheless held out great promise.

The participants in the Talks worked hard, and they have achievements to their credit: such as their rules of procedure, and a measure of agreement, formal and informal, on agendas. But they did not progress into the negotiations on the three strands covering relationships within Northern Ireland between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic and between

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Westminster and Dublin because they failed to reach agreement over the issue of decommissioning. Though in that case, too, a measure of agreement was reached on important mechanisms that would be needed. The imminence of the elections was an increasing drag on the ability of the Talks to function, and eventually the conclusion was reached that nothing further could be achieved in advance of them.

Madam Speaker, it is vital now that the elections are out of the way that we make the greatest effort to move the political process forward. The whole Government, as my Right Honourable friend the Prime Minister recently set out so clearly and comprehensively, is determined to bring new impetus and new energy into the process. We want to see the talks move forward to consider all the key issues that are important to people in Northern Ireland. We have no illusions that this will be a simple matter, and we do not have any delusions of possessing any superior wisdom about how to deal with these issues. But we will work hard with the people of Northern Ireland to find the way through. The present Talks offer a great opportunity for Northern Ireland, and that it will not last indefinitely. Early progress is needed.

That means addressing the issue of decommissioning. I appreciate all the sensitivities the question attracts. But we must try to find a way through, which in practical terms can only, we believe, be on the basis of the formula proposed by Senator Mitchell and his colleagues, of some decommissioning during negotiations.

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I hope we can approach this debate in a new way. Much has changed since 5 March. Electoral uncertainties, in the United Kingdom at least, are out of the way. We as a Government have done all we can to give reassurance and clarity about our policy. We are a what-you-see-is-what-you-get Government. In the Prime Minister's speech of 16 May, we laid the fundamentals out clearly. In particular he made clear our total commitment to the principle of consent: Northern Ireland remains part of the United Kingdom unless there is clear and formal consent to the contrary. But he also made clear that we seek a Northern Ireland where all traditions equally can feel comfortable, and to which they can give allegiance.

And I believe that the feeling that led the people of Great Britain to vote so overwhelmingly for change - a desire for a modern Britain, with old conflicts put behind us - is also very evident among people in Northern Ireland. I believe there is a widespread wish there to resolve old differences, to put an end to violence and to construct a confident new future - one that is co-operative and tolerant.

Madam Speaker, let me touch on the role of Sinn Féin. We want Sinn Féin to be in the political process. But negotiations are inconceivable if one of the parties comes with its mandate backed up by the threat of armed force. That is why an unequivocal restoration of the IRA cease-fire, evidenced in word and deed, is essential to Sinn Féin's entry. That is now the view overwhelmingly taken in the United Kingdom and in the Republic of Ireland; and also among those around the world

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who follow its affairs, including the President of the United States.

The Republican movement should renounce violence unequivocally. We regret they have not done so before. We have made absolutely clear that if they do not, Talks will proceed without them.

Since I have just spoken of the President, let me put on record here our gratitude for the help and cooperation we have received from him and the US Administration. It has been of crucial importance to the Northern Ireland peace process. We are very grateful for it, and especially for the valuable role played by Senator Mitchell as Chairman of the talks – and indeed that of his two co-Chairmen, General de Chastelain and former Prime Minister Holkeri.

That is the backdrop to the debate tonight. This draft Order would bring back into existence the Forum that was established by the Northern Ireland (Entry to Negotiations, etc) Act last year. The Forum is not a part of the Talks themselves.

It is open to all the 110 delegates returned in the elections of May last year. It was suspended by Order in March, following debates here and in another place. Because the multi-party Talks were for the time being suspended, the Forum needed to be suspended too.

Before the general election, during the debate in the House I said that, if I were in a position to introduce this order, I would

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trust that "the central objective of discussing issues relevant to the promotion of dialogue and understanding in Northern Ireland would be at the forefront of peoples' minds when they begin again to take part in forum debates". I repeat that call now.

We have moved as quickly as we could to restore the Forum. The first meeting of the Forum in 1996 came after the talks had opened and we envisaged the same ordering in events now. This Order will come into effect tomorrow, as the Talks open; the forum will be legally free to meet once their session is over for the week. I know some think it should have happened sooner, but I believe that outcome, as well as being practically inevitable, is right in principle.

Views about the work of the forum so far also differ. Though it has investigated a range of issues of current concern in Northern Ireland, and produced some useful and interesting reports, I believe the interests of the whole community are best served when it concentrates on its principal remit, relating to the promotion of dialogue and understanding in Northern Ireland.

I believe that it could become more positive yet if all the parties entitled to seats in the Forum were to take them. I am conscious of the reasons that, for example, led SDLP members to believe that they must leave after the events of Drumcree last year. I can also appreciate that there have at times been things said in the Forum that would not readily attract them

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back - and indeed upset and angered members present. Nevertheless, there is an opportunity there for work to improve the climate in which the search for an over-arching political settlement goes on, by the pursuit together of delegates from all parts of the community of new thinking in areas that bear on political advance.

The role that is conferred on the Forum is a very useful one. I hope that the revived forum will feel able to reach out across the community in Northern Ireland, and approach its work in a spirit of seeking the greatest degree of agreement across the various divides. I hope too that the forum will consider carefully the relationship between its ability to fulfil its statutory remit and the style in which its business is conducted and regulated.

Much good could come from the Forum. I commend the draft Order to the House.