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ARTICLE/SPEECH

Three weeks ago I came to Northern Ireland. I announced that I would allow officials to meet Sinn Féin to make clear how they could participate in talks. There have been [two/three] meetings.

Sinn Féin have asked for clarity on four issues. There is no question of negotiating on these issues. But there have been misunderstandings in the past. So let me set out our position in clear and simple terms. All the people of Northern Ireland have a right to know the Government's approach.

I want Sinn Féin in the negotiations. The people who voted for them should be heard. There is only one route for Sinn Féin into the negotiations - the IRA must restore its ceasefire. It must be genuine and unequivocal. It must be matched in word and deed.

This is what the British and Irish Governments agreed last year. It is what the law requires. The goalposts cannot be moved. Once Sinn Féin meet the requirements, then they must straightaway be invited to join the negotiations.

This is a decision for the Secretary of State. She will make her political judgement of all the circumstances in the round. No one will delay or block the process. But there must be some time to consider the quality of the ceasefire. To see that words and deeds do match. To know that the IRA's ceasefire is for real. To be sure that it is genuine and unequivocal.

Until now no one was sure how long this would take. I want to remove that uncertainty.

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We believe that six weeks is a reasonable period of time in which to see that words and deeds are matching. So, to be clear, if the IRA restores its ceasefire before [20] June so that the statutory requirements are met in word and deed, then Sinn Féin will join the negotiations before the end of July.

will be invited to join?

But the settlement train will not wait for ever. Our aim is to see the three strands of political negotiations launched in September. Sinn Féin must choose whether they are on that train when it leaves, because it will not wait for them.

Let me set out what precisely will happen in the period after the IRA declares an unequivocal restoration of the ceasefire. We shall use it to build confidence on both sides.

For my part, I believe the talks participants might want to consider adjourning the talks if there were a ceasefire. That is a decision for Senator Mitchell and the participants. But the elected Forum could continue to meet and Sinn Féin would be free - as it is now - to take up its seats and join directly in dialogue with the other parties.

In this period, I also envisage - providing word and deed remained consistent - early meetings between Sinn Féin and Ministers; consultations with the Irish Government on whether the agreed requirements were met; meetings with one or more of the parties at a time, including Sinn Féin, and the two governments at Castle Buildings in Belfast to explore the implications of the ceasefire and how to take the negotiations forward; meetings between Sinn Féin and the independent chairmen; and access for Sinn Féin to an office there so they can prepare for the negotiations.

Once in the negotiations, Sinn Féin would be bound by the same rules and agreements accepted by all the other parties. That means the first thing they

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It would have to do is to make a total and absolute commitment to the Mitchell principles of democracy and non-violence accepted by all the other parties

How long will the negotiations themselves take? Although the Government will do all it can to encourage agreement, we cannot force agreement. But negotiations cannot go on for ever without real progress.

I do not expect them to go on beyond the end of May next year, the date set by law for the Forum to end. A number of parties have made it clear they do not want the negotiations to continue without the Forum.

I believe agreement on all the key political issues can be reached by May next year. We shall work for that. We shall work closely with the Irish Government to ensure the approaches taken by both Governments encourage progress. I shall be meeting the Taoiseach again before the end of this year to review this.

It may be that these negotiations will not succeed: the Government cannot dictate progress. But we can and must provide a clear lead now and in the future - a lead which charts a way to an agreement which respects the fundamental rights, identities and aspirations of all sides.

Yet these negotiations are the best chance we have for real progress. Everyone can be there. Any issue can be raised. Everyone is entitled to a fair hearing. The outcome has not been agreed in advance. Nothing has been ruled out. The only requirement for success is agreement.

But we all know the negotiations have not progressed beyond the issue of decommissioning since starting. Our aim is to work to resolve this to the satisfaction of the participants in the next few weeks so that it does not block progress to the start of negotiations on political issues in September.

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We shall work with the Irish Government, the Chairmen and others to find a way to unblock this issue which provides confidence that the negotiations will proceed and arms will be decommissioned.

The key to our proposals will be Senator Mitchell's report on decommissioning. It charts a fair and balanced way forward. We shall work to implement it in full, so that as mutual progress is made on political issues and decommissioning, this creates a growing pattern of mutual trust and confidence on all sides.

Each party comes with its own strong views on decommissioning. But it is clear that the Mitchell Report provides the only realistic way forward. So we shall ask each party to commit itself to work constructively and in good faith to secure the implementation of all aspects of the Mitchell Report.

Some parties have more influence on this issue than others. But all have a direct interest. The two Governments have a special role and responsibility. We must and will ensure that the mechanisms are in place so that decommissioning can start. We must show that the negotiations can move forward in the meantime. We must and will guarantee that there can be no overall agreement without due progress on decommissioning.

So we shall establish, to coincide with the launch of the three stranded negotiations, the Independent Commission recommended by Senator Mitchell and his colleagues.

At the same time, in the negotiations there should be a dedicated Committee, with all the participants, to advance implementation of the Mitchell Report. This could have sub committees on separate subjects.

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We shall also need a regular review mechanism so that everyone can review progress across the whole spectrum of the negotiations. The reality is that the negotiations can only move forward if there is confidence on all sides.

Building confidence on all sides is fundamental to progress. It must be fair and balanced. We set out clear commitments in our manifesto. In the Queen's Speech and elsewhere, we have made a start on implementing them.

Our approach is based on equality of opportunity for all, fair treatment and equal respect for different cultures and traditions.

We are committed to a new respect for the rights of individuals, at home and abroad. We shall incorporate the European Convention on Human Rights into domestic law.

We want more people in work. So we have started a review of training opportunities, particularly for young people.

We shall combat discrimination in the labour market. We shall take forward the Employment Equality Review in the light of SACHR's report due this month.

Conflict over parades destroys confidence on all sides. We respect the right to march and the parallel responsibility to take account of the concerns of those through whose areas marches pass. We will uphold the rule of law. We will implement the North report on parades in legislation later this year, with sensitivity to the concerns of all sides.

We shall work to develop a police service capable of securing support across the community in the years to come. We have already announced our plans for the future structure and style of policing. We will bring in a police complaints system that is seen to be more independent.

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Of course, the greatest boost to confidence is not in our hands. An IRA ceasefire would transform the outlook and prospects for Northern Ireland. We would respond imaginatively, as the threat reduced, to return Northern Ireland to the normal way of life enjoyed elsewhere in the UK.

But confidence-building is a two-way street. An early end to all paramilitary activities, including surveillance and targeting, would demonstrate a commitment to peaceful methods. It would build trust among other parties and alleviate the fears and anxieties of the general population. So, too, would information on missing people, and the return of those who have been forced to leave their communities under threat.

I have set out clearly our position. I have set it out in my terms, not anyone else's.

Now others must make clear their positions. The settlement train is leaving the station. Who will be on board?

The destination is agreement between unionists and nationalists. Realistically, the majority won't accept a united Ireland. But nor will nationalists consent to arrangements staying as they are. The only way forward is a settlement that gets consent from both - which offers a fair, just and equal deal for all. That is why I want to see all parties involved.

The route is via genuine negotiations, open to all. There is no first or second class on this train. Everyone must be there on the same basis. The only ticket Sinn Fein need is for the IRA to restore its ceasefire.

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It is up to each party to decide if it is on board. (But this train is leaving now and won't come back again.) It is time to decide, to move on from the violent conflicts of the past, and to work out a new, lasting and peaceful future for all.

*Smashes at
"last
chance"
-unwill.*

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