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NORTHERN IRELAND
Information Service

4th August 1997

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Attached is the text of a speech delivered today by
the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland,
the Rt Hon Dr Mo Mowlam MP,
at a lunch organised by members of the G7 group,
in the Wellington Park Hotel, Belfast.

This Friday marks the end of the first 100 days of the new Labour government. - 100 days in which so much has changed. In which so much has been achieved working together with people here and throughout the UK.

We have begun on the basis of our principles. And we will continue to govern on those principles.

We have worked on a basis that is fair and in the interests of all - not just a few. Issues that benefit everyone - education, health, tackling unemployment - these have been priorities.

Gordon Brown's first Budget brought not only new resources but a whole new approach to social and economic policy. It was a budget for hope - a budget for the future.

In Northern Ireland it meant nearly £60 million more for schools and the Health Service next year. And £140 million in welfare to work funding from the levy on the privatised utility windfall profits. That money will mean real jobs and real training for over 8000 young people out of work in Northern Ireland. And it will help over 20,000 people here - out of work for over two years - to get back into the labour market.

We said we would make a difference to people trapped on benefit and we will. We said we would govern in a way that was more open and accountable. Already that has begun.

Devolution plans for a Scottish parliament and a Welsh assembly are well advanced. Referendums are planned for both next month. And a freedom of information act is at the white paper stage.

Here in Northern Ireland, we have taken steps to open up government and include more people in the decisions we have to make.

For example, at Westminster we have agreed to make better use of the Northern Ireland Grand Committee and the Select Committee has started its work again. And with regard to public spending, my colleague, Paul Murphy, is contacting many groups and parties already in a wide consultation that will continue towards its conclusions in the Autumn.

But accountability means more than just consultation. It means local people taking real responsibility for decisions that affect them.

In Scotland and Wales there will be new democratic institutions founded on popular support. We want to see new democratic institutions in Northern Ireland too.

People here have missed out for far too long on an accountable and democratic system of government. But to be successful in a divided community like Northern Ireland,

any new democratic institutions have to be founded on agreement and consent. They have to command the support of both communities here.

We know that the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland want a stable and effective system of government. They want accountable arrangements that work in a fair and balanced way.

I see the future for Northern Ireland as a modern player among the regions and nations of Europe. Against a background of progress towards the completion of the single European market, I see new opportunities for trade and co-operation between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic developing. It makes common-sense economically in many areas. But it is also a chance to begin a new era of constructive engagement - building bridges between communities.

The British and Irish governments too have an opportunity to improve the basis on which we work together. One which embraces balanced constitutional change. And one that is more broadly-based than the Anglo-Irish Agreement. These are all key elements in the new settlement we are working for.

From September 15th they will form the three strands in the talks. And for the first time now we have a real chance of including all the Northern Ireland parties in those talks.

By the end of this month, I will make a political judgement, based on all the circumstances in the round, about whether or not the new IRA cease-fire is genuine.

If I decide it is, I will invite Sinn Fein to take part in the talks. That is my responsibility under the law.

Other people have responsibilities too: to their constituents; and to all the people of Northern Ireland; to work together to agree a new deal for the future.

We still have some way to go before talks start. People are very wary and rightly so.

No one wants to negotiate against a threat of violence. That is why the commitment to the Mitchell principles is so important. And it is also why the decommissioning issue has presented so many difficulties.

Decommissioning isn't an arbitrary or unreal issue. It is, as it always has been, about trust and confidence.

We are committed to the total disarmament of all paramilitary organisations. The same has to be true for everyone in the talks.

In practice, the best way to achieve this is by implementing all aspects of the Mitchell Report. We have brought forward proposals with the Irish government on that basis. We remain committed to those proposals and will work to build wider support for them in the weeks ahead.

To demonstrate our commitment, we have decided to complete all the work needed so the international commission could be in a position to begin work alongside the start of substantive negotiations on September 15th. Before that there'll be a plenary of the talks on September 9th.

In the meantime, we will consult the independent chairmen and the parties on how best to complete the opening plenary agenda and make all the necessary preparations for the start of the substantive talks.

I believe the basis for participation in the talks is fair, and I want to see all the parties there. It is up to them, working with the two governments, to show a lead. And I hope you'll continue to help, as leaders in business, trade unions and the voluntary sector.

Everyone has a stake in a peaceful future. And your voices need to be heard in support of those working to make that happen - 18 months of the previous cease-fire gave Northern Ireland companies and their workers a chance to show what they could do. And they took it.

Unemployment fell, jobs and exports increased, tourism boomed. We caught a glimpse of the future. And now we have a second chance.

Lasting peace could bring real economic and social prizes:

- increasing investment and jobs;
- increasing cross border trade and co-operation;
- and many more visitors.

No doubt there has been a lot of progress in recent years despite the difficulties. Investors do have confidence in Northern Ireland as somewhere to do business. And every individual in Northern Ireland can help ensure that confidence isn't undermined.. That was your message, as the Group of Seven, before Drumcree.

Some people weren't listening. But, fortunately, I know you are not deterred and I know you'll continue to look to the future.

I have often been asked, since the election, what my vision for Northern Ireland's future is. A hundred days in, I am beginning to find an answer.

It's all around me. In the small ways in which people here work together. Where generosity and pragmatism gets results. Like on many local councils and district partnerships; like here in the G7. And in hospitals and schools, offices and shop-floors, and in local communities across Northern Ireland.

That's where people really work together. I know it's not always like that. But I also know its changing. And that change needs to be writ large. The politicians need to pick it up and run with it.

At times over the last three months I have been frustrated. At Drumcree when no-one would move away from their bottom-lines for the sake of anybody else.

But elsewhere encouraged:

- like the July 12th weekend where decisive action by the Orange Order helped peace prevail;
- the IRA's crucial decision to restore their cease-fire - and the loyalists maintaining theirs;
- like the Ulster Unionist's decision not walk away from the talks;
- and the patience of the other parties over the months when no progress was made;

I have seen real political courage. And the determination to move forward in the interests of all.

Afterall, what is there to fear? Consent is there as a central and inviolable principle. There isn't going to be any change in Northern Ireland's constitutional status unless a majority here want it. But if they do want change, we'll support it.

The talks require that any new arrangements have to be agreed among the parties, and have the consent of the people and of Parliament at Westminster. No one is going to be pushed or bullied or beguiled. Open and honest discussion, with all views on the table, is the only sensible and realistic way forward. It threatens no one.

But it does require confidence on both sides.

We will do all we can to help build that confidence, and I have mentioned some steps already. There are others that can be taken.

For example,

- We will introduce a Bill this Autumn to implement the North recommendations on parades. And we will do it bearing in mind the concerns of both communities - informed again by our discussions and experiences this year.
- We will take an historic step forward on human rights by incorporating the European Convention on Human Rights into the law throughout the UK. These are among the issues I've no doubt the parties in the talks will want to consider themselves - and our proposals provide for that.

- Senator Mitchell thought that "continued action by the governments on prisoners would bolster trust". We see the particular sensitivity of prisons issues on both sides. As a matter of general principle the Government is committed to ensuring that prisoners are treated with dignity and respect for their rights and subject to no more security restrictions than the risk to the public requires. That is the principled basis on which we will move forward.

Taking action to help further eradicate discrimination, to set basic standards in employment and provide equal opportunities for all is an article of faith for the new Labour government. As is treating the identities and cultures of both traditions in Northern Ireland with equal respect.

I believe that substantial changes in the way we approach security can also be a major factor in building confidence for the future. Clearly changes can only be introduced when it safe to do so.

While terrorist organisations continue to exist; still have their guns and their bombs; and remain active - as we saw last Friday outside the Carrybridge Hotel - the Government can't afford to let its guard drop, but we can do some things to create a more normal environment.

There have already been significant and visible changes. There are fewer troops on the streets and the sight of police officers without body armour or machine guns is becoming common again.

What we ultimately want is Northern Ireland free from the need to have soldiers on the streets and in the air;

An environment where policing provides reassurance for the whole community and is focused solely on preventing and solving crime rather than deterring and fighting terrorism,

And circumstances where the trappings of overt security, including the use of plastic baton rounds, can be consigned to the past.

But confidence is a two way thing. Those who in the past have taken the path of terrorism must play their part in helping to restore normality.

The cease-fires are a major and essential contribution. They have allowed the security forces to make changes and I know they will not be slow to go further when they can. But more can and should be done - including a commitment to the decommissioning of illegal weapons.

There are things the Government can do to build trust in both communities - and we will. But the real prospect for building on a secure and confident basis rests with the parties in the talks.

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There is a new Northern Ireland on the horizon. You might need a telescope to see it now. But it is there.

It is based on:

- partnership, co-operation and trust;
- on an open and democratic life;
- and on a thriving civil society with economic prosperity that benefits the many not the few.

It is a beautiful place - as it is now - but in the future visitors won't be put off by scenes of violence and mayhem.

It's not a dream. As Tony Blair would say, I am not dewy eyed. It could be real, if people here really want it.

I, for one, am convinced they do.