



NORTHERN IRELAND Information Service

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A HUNDRED DAYS ON AND A SECOND CHANCE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

Northern Ireland Secretary of State Dr Mo Mowlam MP today outlined her vision for a better Northern Ireland and stressed that after only one hundred days in office that much has been achieved working with the politicians and people in Northern Ireland.

Speaking at a lunch organised by members of the G7 Group in Belfast, Dr Mowlam said:

"This Friday marks the end of the first 100 days of the new Labour Government - 100 days in which so much has changed - both in GB and in Northern Ireland.

Stressing that for too long Northern Ireland has been viewed as a region apart because of its political problems Dr Mowlam pointed out the benefits already delivered in the form of new funds for health, education and welfare to work - issues that matter to all and not just a few and which are crucial to a stable society.

She said:

"In Northern Ireland Labour's first budget 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 meaning real jobs and training for over 8,000 young people out of work.

"It will help over 20,000 people who have been out of work for over two years get back into the labour market."

Stressing the importance of people and not just politics Dr Mowlam said:

"I have often been asked since the election what my vision for Northern Ireland's future is. 100 days in, I am beginning to find the answer. It's all around me. In the small ways in which people here work together. Like on many local councils and district partnerships, like here in G7, and in hospital and schools, offices and shop floors, and in local communities across Northern Ireland.

"That's where people really work together. I know it is not always like that. But I also know it is changing. And the politicians need to pick it up and run with it."

Dr Mowlam stressed that this feeling of change came in many ways. She said:

04/08/97 13:26:56 Via Fax

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0171 839 9044 NO 10

Page 009

"Like 12th July weekend where the decisive actions of the Orange Order helped peace prevail; like the IRA's crucial decision to restore their ceasefire, and the loyalists maintaining theirs; like the Ulster Unionists decision not to 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.

"After all, what is there to fear? Consent is there as a central and inviolable principle. There is not 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."

Dr Mowlam outlined the need to foster confidence on both sides:

"We will do all we can to build that confidence. 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.

"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 risk to the public requires.

"Taking action to help further eradicate discrimination, to set basic standards in employment and provide equal opportunity 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.

"Substantial changes in the way we approach security can also be a major factor in building confidence in the future. Clearly changes can only be introduced when it is 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.

04/08/97 13:27:14 Via Fax

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0171 839 9044 NO 10

Page 010

"We can do some things to create a more normal environment. There have already been significant and visible changes.

"But what we want is Northern Ireland free from the need to have soldiers on the streets, and an environment where policing provides reassurance for the whole community and circumstances where the trappings of overt security, including the use of plastic baton rounds, can be consigned to the past."

Turning to the paramilitaries Dr Mowlam stressed:

"But confidence is a two way thing. Those who have in the past taken the path of terrorism must play their part in helping to restore normality. The ceasefires 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 should be done including a commitment to the decommissioning of illegal weapons. We are committed to the total disarmament of all paramilitary organisations. The same must be true for everyone in the talks."

Underlining her hopes for the autumn Dr Mowlam said:

"For the first time now we have real chance of including all the Northern Ireland parties in talks starting on 15 September. 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 ceasefire is genuine. If 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 the people of Northern Ireland - to work together to agree a new deal for the future.

"Now we all have a second chance to achieve a lasting peace - we all must aim to seize it."