

## **PRIME MINISTER'S ARTICLE FOR BELFAST NEWSLETTER**

Talks on a political settlement in Northern Ireland restart in earnest on Monday. There is now a real opportunity to move forward to a rapid settlement. I am determined that discussion of the substantive issues should start next week and conclude by May at the latest.

Sinn Fein will be at the talks, following our assessment two weeks ago that the IRA ceasefire was unequivocal so far and Sinn Fein's commitment to the Mitchell Principles earlier this week. The absence of violence and this commitment are welcome indeed. We will hold them to it.

Sinn Fein's presence at the negotiating table is still very hard for many people to accept. This is entirely understandable, after all the years of IRA terrorism, and the breakdown of the last ceasefire. People's suspicions have hardly been helped by the IRA's worrying comments earlier in the week, casting doubt on Republican commitment to the Mitchell principles, and suggesting there could be no decommissioning of terrorist weapons before a final settlement.

No-one should be naïve about the IRA and Sinn Fein. The two organisations are inextricably linked. One cannot credibly claim to be acting independently of the other. But, whatever problems some members of the IRA may have about the Mitchell principles, a firm commitment to non-violence and democracy is the only basis for negotiations. Sinn Fein has signed up to those vital principles – and perhaps the IRA comments are a sign of what a serious step this is. As I

- 2 -

say, we will be holding them firmly to these commitments. If they are dishonoured, for example by any return to violence by the IRA or front organisations for it, let there be no doubt that Sinn Fein will not be able to stay in the negotiations.

Meanwhile Gerry Adams has a lot of questions to answer when the talks resume on Monday. And I hope all the parties will be there to join us in asking those questions. That is the value of face-to-face negotiations.

Taking part in negotiations does not mean forgetting the victims of violence and the pain still felt every day by their families. On the contrary, we must remember now particularly the sacrifices made by so many to preserve democracy. The Government is looking with some urgency at how best to mark these sacrifices and help those left behind.

But our aim must be a lasting political settlement which has the support of both communities and can bring lasting peace to Northern Ireland. We want to see a situation in which there need be no more victims of violence. That is why I am so committed to making a success of these negotiations. There is a deep thirst for peace among all the people of Northern Ireland, and for normality and prosperity. The opportunity to realise this dream is in front of us. I am determined to take it, and urge all the political parties of Northern Ireland to do the same.

Soon after the election, I came to Belfast and made clear the priority I give to this issue. I said that I was committed to Northern Ireland and to the principle of consent. I repeat that now.



- 3 -

The consent principle is absolutely fundamental to my approach. Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom because that is the wish of a majority of the people who live here. Let me make it abundantly clear: it will remain part of the United Kingdom so long as that remains the case. That is not just a statement of fact but a commitment to a basic principle of democracy. And I value the Union and Northern Ireland's place within it.

Naturally what we are aiming for is a settlement which commands the consent of both communities. Any settlement must be negotiated. Let me recall that the negotiations are governed by the principle of sufficient consensus, under which all conclusions must have the support of parties representing a majority of Unionists and a majority of Nationalists. Finally, any settlement must be endorsed both by the people of Northern Ireland in a referendum and by the British Parliament.

So the triple lock is in place, as strong as ever. Fears about an imposed settlement are entirely misplaced. And the basic elements of a settlement are reasonably clear - a devolved Assembly and mutually beneficial agreed North-South arrangements in the context of a broader-based agreement addressing the totality of relationships within these islands - although there will of course be fierce argument about the details, and some will be arguing for a united Ireland, as they are perfectly entitled to do.

There is nothing for any democrat to fear from these negotiations. On the contrary, they can be assured that basic democratic principles will be followed and respected throughout. I will not stand for any attempt to use violence, or the threat of violence, to influence the talks process or the outcome of the negotiations.



- 4 -

It is worth recalling what the Mitchell Principles actually say. All participants in the talks have declared an absolute and total commitment to:

- democratic and exclusively peaceful means of resolving political issues;
- the total disarmament of all paramilitary organisations;
- renunciation of force or the threat of force to influence negotiations;
- and agreement to abide by the result of negotiations, again without any question of resorting to force.

The negotiations will not be easy. All will have to make compromises and sacrifices. That is the nature of negotiations. It is time to put the past behind us and look to a better future.

What makes this so difficult is lack of confidence. That is why confidence-building measures are so crucial. The most important of these is decommissioning of paramilitary weapons. For our part, we believe in the Mitchell compromise, of some decommissioning during the negotiations. This is not a precondition for negotiations, but actual decommissioning would greatly improve the prospects for success.

That is why we and the Irish Government have taken all the necessary steps to set up the Independent Commission on decommissioning. It will be fully operational from the start of substantive negotiations next week.

Some say that the confidence of the Unionist community has diminished over the summer. I do not think this perception is soundly based, but I recognise it. We are doing all we can to address it and to demonstrate that we want to build

- 5 -

confidence on all sides. I believe that greater transparency in how the Government operates would help here, to remove misunderstandings which can easily creep in.

We have made a number of announcements in recent days to tackle this, for example on how we intend to implement the recent Coopers & Lybrand report on primary school funding and the ability of local government to develop property and land in its own area.

There are other concerns too, for example that the Government is going to rush into reform of policing structures without proper opportunity for scrutiny and debate. Let me make clear now that there will be plenty of time for detailed discussion and consideration. Any changes requiring legislation will be made by Bill. Similarly, on firearms legislation, we will not do anything which is not appropriate to the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland, both in terms of the way of life in the Province and the personal security concerns of particular individuals.

Both communities must feel confidence in the future and in the democratic process. Both must feel included in the negotiations and their outcome. Without that, we cannot succeed.

On Thursday, the people of Scotland voted for a change, the chance they wanted to have more say in running their own affairs. Next Thursday I am confident the people of Wales will follow. I want the people of Northern Ireland to have that same opportunity. That is what the talks can bring.

I said in my speech in Belfast in May that our new Government might only have one chance to build on the momentum of its fresh mandate. I spoke of the



- 6 -

settlement train being about to leave, and my desire to see everyone on it. The settlement train is leaving next week, in an environment now free of violence. I hope everyone will be on it.