CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

OPENING STATEMENT
JOINT COMMITTEE ON GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT
THURSDAY, 26 JANUARY 2023

It is a great pleasure to meet with you today, and I'm only sorry I can't be with you in person.

You were kind enough to invite me to make an opening statement.

As I made clear before I accepted your invitation, I was only involved in the work that led up to the GFA. The negotiation of it was undertaken after I left Government. It is for others to respond to that.

When I became Prime Minister in November 1990 I had no background in Northern Ireland issues and so, perhaps, the first question is – why did I become so concerned about "The Troubles"?

The answer is simple. Life in Northern Ireland over the previous 25 years had never been free of terror and, to me, violence was as unacceptable there as it would have been anywhere else in the UK.

For that reason, between 1990/97 I visited Northern Ireland more often than anywhere else – at home or overseas.

In 1990, Peter Brooke [S/S NI] had opened an intelligence channel to receive messages from the Provisional IRA, and by November of that year he had made the important statement that the British government had "no selfish or strategic interest in Northern Ireland".

I spent a long time reading myself in to the problem and its history. I did so to get into the minds of the opposing factions so that I might better understand their fears and ambitions. It was clear the hopes of Unionists and Nationalists were far apart.

Throughout the years ahead, my door was always open to politicians of all Parties as well as the Churches and Community bodies. Later, I had innumerable meetings with Albert Reynolds and John Bruton – often informal and private.

One relationship was already in play: it was the Hume-Adams dialogue which had begun in 1988. This was in some ways helpful, but in others less so. I will come to that later.

In February 1992, Albert Reynolds became Taoiseach and, within a fortnight, we had a private supper at Downing Street. We discovered an empathy, and a shared ambition to end violence in Northern Ireland.

Despite disagreements, rows, and frustrations, our friendship held until the day Albert died. His role in advancing peace should never be underestimated. He was a remarkable man who became a friend to cherish.

Sometimes we disagreed. Many disagreements were trivial: others more substantial. Albert would have liked me to become a persuader for unification but that I could not – and *would* not – do. If I had done so, it would have broken the peace process – because the Unionist community would have never co-operated.

It was clear that unification – if it were ever to come about – would have to be with the open consent of the Unionist community. Any attempt at duress would have failed and led to renewed violence. That was – and *remains* – true.

At that time, the three stranded talks were often stalled because the political Parties would talk only to the UK Government and not to each other. Unionists were suspicious of the Hume-Adams talks in which there was no Unionist voice.

In late 1992, Paddy Mayhew [new S/S NI] promised a "fair deal" to all who abandoned terrorism.

Soon afterwards, we received a "back channel" message from the Provisionals. It was dramatic:

"The conflict is over but we need your advice on how to bring it to a close. We wish to have an unannounced ceasefire in order to hold a dialogue leading to peace."

It went on – to point up a real problem for the Provisionals:

"We *cannot* announce such a move as it will lead to confusion to the volunteers, because the press will misinterpret it as surrender."

This fear helps explain why bombings went on even as the process advanced.

The message ended:

"We cannot meet the Secretary of State's public renunciation of violence, but it would be given privately as long as we were sure we were not being tricked."

But – was the message genuine? I was assured that it came from Martin McGuinness (although he always denied it).

Or was it a trick?

If genuine, and we ignored it, we would have lost a chance of peace.

We could lose our jobs – or lose the Peace Process.

Paddy and I consulted colleagues, and decided to respond positively. In March 1993:

- we agreed to an exploratory dialogue;
- with no pre-determined outcome and emphasised;
- the result *could* be a united Ireland but only on basis of *consent* by the people of Northern Ireland.

Despite this, violence continued. On the very day our reply was delivered two small boys were killed in Warrington. That atrocity nearly brought the peace process to a halt.

Bombs at Bishopsgate and an explosion in the centre of Belfast soon followed.

My judgement was that the IRA believed that continuing violence would reassure their members there was no weakness on the Provisional side.

So we continued with talks.

On 23 October 1993, 10 people were killed in Shankill Road by the Provisionals. A week later, the Loyalists retaliated by killing 8 and wounding 19 in Greysteel.

Such outrages caused deep public revulsion. We then received a further message. It claimed the British Government couldn't solve the problems talking only with Dublin: when would we open dialogue with the IRA "in the event of a total end to hostilities?".

This message set no conditions for such talks.

I convened a meeting with senior colleagues, and we agreed to spell out in detail what *we* needed for talks, and what the IRA had to do.

This we did on 5 November 1993. We stressed there could be *no* secret agreement with them. There *could* be dialogue, but *only* after a permanent end to violence.

If that were obtained we would open dialogue "within one week of Parliament's return" in January 1994. This was the *last* message to go via the private route.

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The idea of a Joint Declaration – a good one – sprang from the Hume-Adams talks.

Dublin had been discussing it with Adams in 1991: Charles Haughey had suggested it to me even earlier.

In February 1992, John Hume offered a text – presumably from Sinn Fein.

Albert Reynolds knew the February text was unacceptable but could not shift the Provisionals. He presented it to us – and we rejected it. In June, Irish officials offered a different text. The idea was sound but, in truth, *both* texts were dead in the water.

Also, in June 1993, I met Albert Reynolds and Dick Spring. We liked the principle of a Joint Declaration. It could offer a way forward for Unionists, Nationalists and Paramilitaries.

I met Albert in Brussels by which time it was clear the Hume-Adams process would *never* be acceptable to Unionists. If *any* Declaration were to be widely accepted it would have to be negotiated by London and Dublin, and accepted by the British and Irish Parliaments.

In October 1993, progress was stuck, and I reiterated publicly that *if* the IRA ended violence Sinn Fein could enter politics as a Democratic Party. Ironically, public disgust at the violence in Shankill and Graysteel moved us forward.

We developed our own text – with helpful advice from James Molyneux and the Church of Ireland. Albert Reynolds initially rejected our text, but then suggested amendments – and the chance of an agreement rose.

We met at Dublin Castle on 3 December 1993. Albert and I had a fierce row over our back channel and Irish "leaks".

But we then turned to the Draft and made progress. Failure would have been disastrous but slowly and surely, we worked towards an agreement. If we had failed, the Peace Process might have become untenable. On 14 December, we agreed the final text by telephone.

The next day, Albert came to London and we announced the agreed Joint Declaration. At last, we had the basis of an agreement that received overwhelming support.

It was a basis only: a set of agreed principles. A beginning. *But*, after 70 years of partition and 24 years of bloodshed, it was an agreement both the UK and Ireland could accept.

From then, I was confident a deal could be done. So was Albert. A mini Rubicon had been crossed.

The text was convoluted but served its purpose. It promised a fair outcome.

The Unionists were reassured a united Ireland would *only* come about *with their consent.*

Nationalists were promised their interests *would be protected.*

The *paramilitaries were offered a route into political life.* This was all an essential preliminary to the Good Friday Agreement.

On 31 August 1994, a ceasefire was announced by the IRA. I made clear publicly that *if* it were irreversible we would respond positively.

To accompany the ceasefire, IRA supporters came onto the streets to declare a triumph, which carried the flavour of a victory for them (which it wasn't) and this destabilised the ever-fearful-of-being-betrayed Unionists.

It was a smart, if cynical move by the IRA to cover the backs of their leaders. The outcome was welcome, but there was still *no* commitment to permanence or – as events were to prove – to disarmament. Nor did "punishment beatings" end.

To encourage movement towards a settlement I:

(i) committed the Government to a referendum on the eventual outcome of constitutional talks;
(ii) lifted the ban on broadcasting the voices of spokesmen for the Provisionals;
(iii) relaxed some security measures.

Our intention was to encourage the Provisionals into the political process.

On 13 October 1994, the *Loyalist* paramilitaries also halted violence, and hopes rose that we might move into a permanent ceasefire. I announced a new package of measures on the "working assumption" the ceasefire would hold.

I also promised talks with paramilitaries on both sides to include "how illegal weapons and explosives could be removed from life in Northern Ireland". I promised, also, we would convene an investment conference to inject money into the North.

Throughout all this, the Unionists remained nervous, always fearful there could be a "sell-out".

They were suspicious of an IRA leadership apparently committed to peace while, at the same time, recruiting new volunteers.

At this point, in December 1994, Albert Reynolds resigned as Taoiseach – which was a great disappointment to me – personally and politically.

I was lucky that John Bruton succeeded Albert. He, like Albert, was keen to move forward.

1994 ended positively. British officials met Sinn Fein (for the first time in 25 years) and also met the Loyalists. The Investment Conference I promised met in Belfast (Europa Hotel).

Officials from the NIO and their counterparts in Dublin were working on what became the "Framework Documents".

Strand One – the internal government of Northern Ireland – proposed a new Executive and Assembly (which was, of course, the sole responsibility of London and Belfast).

Strand Two covered relations between Belfast and Dublin; while Strand Three covered relations between the UK and the Republic.

All three strands needed agreement. "Nothing is agreed until all is agreed" remained our mantra.

During 1994, Albert and I – together with Paddy Mayhew and Dick Spring – had worked on the documents. It was hard pounding.

Progress was on a knife's edge.

At this pivotal moment, what Paddy Mayhew called "black work at the crossroads" nearly derailed the whole Process.

The London "Times" was leaked an extract from the text of the Framework Document, and wrote an incorrect report of it – with the assertion that it "brought the prospect of a united Ireland closer than at any time since Partition in 1920".

We told them *categorically* their story was wrong – but they printed it anyway.

At that moment, nothing could have been more damaging to the Peace Process.

I called a midnight meeting of Parliamentary colleagues to brief them, in order to avoid outright rebellion in Parliament. It was a close run thing, but they accepted our word, not least because Robert Cranborne (now Lord Salisbury) – as an undoubted Unionist – supported us.

After this we pressed ahead – meeting Unionists to allay their fears.

In February 1995, John Bruton and I reached agreement and launched the Joint Framework Documents in Belfast – and put the proposals out for public consultation. I would like to pay tribute to John for his skilled and constructive commitment to getting us over the line.

The Unionists were hostile, the Republican Bishops complained, the Presbyterians said the documents were "too green" but – as the proposals were examined more closely – vocal criticisms fell away.

But the Unionists would not accept the Joint Framework Documents as a basis for progress.

So, Paddy Mayhew produced an "Issues" Paper. Shorn of constitution prose, it helped ease the fears of a majority of critics.

It seemed – for a time – the "Frameworks" might fail: there were no "inclusive" talks, nor renewed constitutional negotiations. But they did not.

Reassembled, they became the basis for the Good Friday Agreement.

1995 was the first year in a quarter of a century without any terrorist killings in Northern Ireland – although there was occasional violence.

The problem of guns and explosives remained, which the British and Irish Governments agreed *had* to be addressed.

The Provisionals sought entry to the negotiations – but stone-walled over weapons – claiming (falsely) that decommissioning was a new issue.

That was demonstrably untrue but, from their perspective, surrendering weapons – especially to the *British* Government – looked like a defeat.

Gerry Adams said in terms: "we must take the gun out of Irish politics" with which I wholly agreed. But he then argued this included the army and the police – who did not bomb, murder or knee-cap.

During this convoluted discussion some progress was made – but then undermined.

In October, 1994, we had set up a "Working Group" headed by
Sir John Chilcot [PUS NIO) and Tim Dalton [PUS at Ireland's DOJ].

Its Report, in February 1995, suggested decommissioning should begin with "a worthwhile quantity of arms", with parallel progress in relaxing security measures and release of prisoners.

On 3 November, to further encourage progress, Michael Ancram met Martin McGuinness. A meeting between Paddy Mayhew and McGuinness followed. No movement on decommissioning resulted.

In June 1995, John Bruton and I met at an EU Summit (in Cannes) and agreed to build on the idea of an International Commission (first suggested by Ken Maginnis, UUP).

As Chilcot and Dalton worked up the idea, the US Ambassador to the UK, Admiral William Crowe, met Adams to protest at their refusal to move on decommissioning.

I agreed more private Ministerial meetings with Sinn Fein – which drew predictable opposition in and beyond the British Parliament. Critics were wary that Sinn Fein was allied to an armed militia.

Patrick Mayhew was developing a "twin-track" initiative based on parallel progress on decommissioning *and* political progress.

As the first anniversary of the ceasefire approached, on 31 August 1995 threats of a breakdown led to requests for concessions – in essence for *not* returning to killing people.

On 1 September 1995, the two governments reached agreement on a Summit to be held five days later to launch the proposed Decommissioning Body.

The Provisionals did all they could to block it. The Irish Government was threatened with a return to violence – and "bodies in the streets".

John Hume supported opposition to the "twin-track" agreement.

John Bruton tried to hold the line but it became clear that postponement was a more prudent course.

The Americans tried to revive the initiative in mid-September but were rebuffed by Gerry Adams.

At a meeting of EU leaders in Majorca, John Bruton was resolute that he still wished to revive the twin-track proposals and – days later – both David Trimble and Ian Paisley proposed an elected Assembly where all Parties could meet.

November brought setbacks. Unhelpful leaks from America suggested they wished to "knock heads together". US proposals were rejected by the Provisionals.

John Hume and Martin McGuinness suggested ideas that would undermine the International Commission, and set ultimata for All-Party Talks that – as John Bruton commented – "had no hope of running".

To regain momentum, the Northern Ireland Office re-packaged the "twin-track" proposals into a "Building Blocks" Paper. Tortuous negotiations followed. Sinn Fein accused the British Government of insisting on surrender. To refute this we published the "Paper" in full.

On 28 November 1995, John Bruton and I met at Downing Street and agreed both the twin-track initiative and to establish an international body to assess decommissioning.

We announced a three-man International Body with Senator George Mitchell as its Head [General John de Chastelain and Harri Holkeri], and asked them to report by mid-January 1996.

I doubt if George or his colleagues realised how long they would be involved.

President Clinton arrived in London the following day. He was shocked when I showed him evidence that – since the 1994 ceasefire – the IRA had carried out 148 so-called "punishment" beatings, and the Loyalists 75.

In speeches in Britain, and the North and South of Ireland, Bill Clinton rammed home the peace message, condemned "punishment beatings", and attacked terror. It was a stellar performance.

The IRA responded a week later saying there was "no question of meeting the demand for a surrender of IRA weapons".

But public opinion was moving against violence. Before Christmas 1995, I made my thirteenth visit to N. Ireland and was greeted (with John Bruton) in the South with tremendous public support for what we were doing.

In 1996, the Provisionals dug in. They were waiting for a UK General Election with polls indicating the probability of a Labour Government.

The Mitchell Report (in January 1996) noted "nearly universal support… for the total and verifiable disarmament of all paramilitary organisations."

Mitchell noted: "The IRA will not decommission arms prior to All-Party negotiations. He added: "An elective process could contribute to the building of confidence.".

But the dilemma remained – of how to bring all the parties together.

"The IRA and other paramilitaries would not get rid of their weapons" and until they did "the Unionists would not enter talks". It looked like stalemate.

An elective body to bring all parties together seemed the only way forward but it attracted impassioned opposition from John Hume, who accused the Government of "trying to buy votes to keep themselves in power".

This was an unfair attack, uncharacteristic – and *untrue*.

Matters worsened in February 1996, when the IRA ended their ceasefire by exploding a bomb at Canary Wharf killing 2 people and injuring over a 100. As a matter of course, they blamed the British Government.

The Canary Wharf bomb broke the peace and lost support for the Provisionals in Ireland and America. It brought London and Dublin even closer together.

On 28 February 1996, the UK and Irish Governments agreed Ground Rules for All-Party Talks, and confirmed they could begin on 10 June. Elections to the negotiating body would be in May.

The elections took place (with Sinn Fein) but, a month later, the IRA exploded a massive bomb in Manchester, only days after the opening of the All-Party Talks under Senator Mitchell's chairmanship.

This bomb convinced me we would not reach a settlement before the next election.

It was clear that a new Government would need to pick up the talks. Tony Blair and Labour had been supportive throughout the Process, and I was confident they would carry it forward.

They did not carry the scars of 18 years of dispute in Government with the IRA, and I believed they would be able to build on the Joint Declaration, the Framework Document, the united international support for the Peace Process, and the work of George Mitchell and his Committee.

It is greatly to Tony Blair's credit that they did.

But, if I may, I would add one final point.

The Peace Process did not progress simply because of the politicians and their officials. The Northern Ireland community, the Churches, individual clerics, groups such as the Peace Women – and so many others – all played an important part.

I hope that no one person, no group, no political party – and no ideology – will now risk imperilling the peace so carefully constructed by so *many*, for so *long*.