

Declaration issued by the Taoiseach, Mr Ahern, and the British Prime Minister, Mr Blair, at Hillsborough Castle, 1 April 1999

**Working draft
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Declaration**

"It is now one year since the Good Friday Agreement was concluded. Last May it was emphatically endorsed by the people, North and South, and as such it now represents their democratic will.

The Agreement, in its own words, offers a truly historic opportunity for a new beginning. It gives us a chance, in this generation, to transcend the bitter legacy of the past and to transform relationships within Northern Ireland, between North and South, and between these islands.

All parties firmly believe that the violence we have all lived through must be put behind us. Never again should we or our children have to suffer the consequences of conflict. It must be brought to a permanent end. In partnership together we want to ensure a future free from conflict.

The realisation of that future places a heavy obligation on us all, individually and collectively. The implementation in full of the Agreement is inevitably a lengthy and complex process, involving continuing effort and commitment on all our parts.

It is encouraging and important that, even though much remains to be done, very substantial progress has already been made in turning the promise of the Agreement into a reality. We must not forget or underplay how far we have come.

Balanced changes to both the Irish Constitution and to British constitutional legislation based on the principle of consent, have been approved and are now ready to take effect.

The Northern Ireland Assembly was elected last June and has since been preparing for devolution. The international agreement signed in Dublin on 8 March provides for the establishment of the North-South ministerial council and implementation bodies, the British-Irish Council and the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference.

The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission has been established and its members appointed, and the new Equality Commission has been legislated for. Comparable steps by the Irish Government are well under way.

The needs of victims of violence, and their families, including those of the disappeared, are being addressed in both jurisdictions, though we acknowledge that for many their pain and suffering will never end.

The commitments in the Agreement in relation to economic, social and cultural issues, including as regards the Irish language, are being carried forward, though much of this work is inevitably long term.

Steps have been taken towards normalisation of security arrangements and practices, while the Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland and the review of criminal justice are both well advanced in their vital work.

Numerous prisoners, in both jurisdictions, have benefited from mechanisms providing for their accelerated release.

Against this background there is agreement among all parties that decommissioning is not a precondition but is an obligation deriving from their commitment in the Agreement, and that it should take place within the time-scale envisaged in the Agreement, and through the efforts of the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning.

Sinn Féin have acknowledged these obligations but are unable to indicate the time-scale on which decommissioning will begin. They do not regard the Agreement as imposing any requirement to make a start before the establishment of the new institutions.

The UUP do not wish to move to the establishment of the new institutions without some evident progress with decommissioning.

It would be a tragedy if this difference of view about timing and the sequence of events prevented the implementation of the Agreement from advancing.

We believe that decommissioning will only happen against a background where implementation is actively moving forward. Continued progress in establishing the new institutions will in itself create confidence. On the other hand, it is understandable that those who take the next steps in implementation should seek to be assured that these steps are not irrevocable if, in the event, no progress is made with decommissioning.

We therefore propose the following way forward.

On [date to be set] nominations will be made under the d'Hondt procedure of those to take up office as ministers when powers are devolved.

At a date to be proposed by the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning but not later than [one month after nomination date] a collective act of reconciliation will take place. This will see some arms put beyond use on a voluntary basis, in a manner which will be verified by the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning, and further moves on normalisation and demilitarisation in recognition of the changed situation on security.

In addition to the arrangements in respect of military material, there will at all times be ceremonies of remembrance of all victims of violence, to which representatives of all parties and the two governments, and all churches, will be invited.

Around the time of the act of reconciliation, powers will be devolved and the British-Irish Agreement will enter into force.

The following institutions will then be established: the NorthSouth Ministerial Council, the North-South Implementation Bodies, the British-Irish Council and the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference.

By [one month after nomination date], the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning will make a report on progress. It is understood by all that the successful implementation of the Agreement will be achieved if these steps are taken within the proposed time-scales; if they are not taken, the nominations mentioned above will fall to be confirmed by the Assembly."