

Joint Statement by Tony Blair, then British Prime Minister, and Bertie Ahern, then Taoiseach (Irish Prime Minister), on the recalling of the Assembly, Armagh, (6 April 2006)

- 1.** In recent months we have held discussions with all the political parties in Northern Ireland with a view to restoring the political institutions and building on the peace and prosperity which have flowed from the Good Friday Agreement.
- 2.** When we last met, we noted the historic progress represented by the IRA statement of July 2005. We are convinced that the IRA no longer represents a terrorist threat. By any standards, that is a momentous stage in the history of Northern Ireland. On that basis, we have made it clear that all parties should engage in political dialogue. We have also made it clear that all parties should support the police as the most effective way of addressing continuing concerns about criminality.
- 3.** We cannot force anyone to enter the political institutions. Every part of the political process over the past eight years has been voluntary. What we can do is to set out what we believe to be a practical framework and a reasonable timescale for moving forward. While we are conscious of the view that further confidence needs to be established, we also know that time alone is not enough: trust will not build itself in the absence of positive engagement by all parties. Everyone in Northern Ireland is aware of the dangers of a political vacuum.
- 4.** The Assembly will therefore be recalled on 15 May. Recognising that it has not sat for nearly four years, it seems sensible to give the Assembly a short period in which to prepare for government as envisaged by paragraph 35 of Strand One of the Good Friday Agreement. The Assembly's primary responsibility would be to elect a First and Deputy First Minister as soon as possible, to allocate Ministerial posts under the d'Hondt formula and to make other preparations for Government within Northern Ireland and in the North/South and East/West fields.
- 5.** As soon as the Assembly elects a First and Deputy First Minister on a cross-community basis and forms an Executive, power will automatically be devolved to the Assembly, as happened in December 1999, and all its functions will be resumed. At that point the British Government's power to suspend the Assembly will lapse for good.
- 6.** If, despite best efforts, the Assembly is not able to elect a First and Deputy First Minister on a cross-community basis within the normal six week period, we would be prepared to allow a further period of 12 weeks after the summer recess in which to form an Executive and we would expect it to do so at the earliest opportunity within this timeframe.
- 7.** We are also conscious that all parties have made proposals for the better functioning of the institutions and that discussion on these issues has not yet

concluded. It would be open to the parties to continue these discussions with each other and with the Governments, as appropriate, so that consideration could be given to proposals for the implementation of the Agreement, including changes to Strands 1 to 3 in the context of a commitment by all involved to participate in a power-sharing Executive.

8. It would of course also be open to the Assembly to prepare for Government by considering issues which the Executive will have to deal with, such as future economic strategy, water rates, public administration and education. Ministers would naturally take account of views which command cross-community support within the Assembly.

9. While it is reasonable to give the Assembly a little more time, there must be a clear limit. We said in January that a power-sharing Executive must be formed this year. If by 24 November the Assembly has failed to achieve this, we do not believe that any purpose would be served by a further election at that point or a few months later in May 2007. We do not think that the people of Northern Ireland should be asked to participate in elections to a deadlocked Assembly. There would be no choice but to cancel salaries and allowances for MLAs and to defer restoration of the Assembly and Executive until there is a clear political willingness to exercise devolved power. The Governments would, of course, stand ready to facilitate full restoration when all parties indicate such willingness.

10. If restoration of the Assembly and Executive has to be deferred, the Governments agree that this will have immediate implications for their joint stewardship of the process. We are beginning detailed work on British-Irish partnership arrangements that will be necessary in these circumstances to ensure that the Good Friday Agreement, which is the indispensable framework for relations on and between these islands, is actively developed across its structures and functions. This work will be shaped by the commitment of both Governments to a step-change in advancing North-South co-operation and action for the benefit of all.

11. The British Government will introduce emergency legislation to facilitate this way forward. It will set out clearly the limited timescale available to the Assembly to reach agreement. In parallel with the recalling of the Assembly, we will engage intensively with the parties to establish the trust necessary to allow the institutions not only to function but to flourish. There is a great deal of work to be done. The Governments will do all in their power to restore the institutions and return devolved Government to those elected by the people of Northern Ireland. But the final decisions are for the parties. We hope they will seize the opportunity to move forward."

Sources: Cain Web Service

<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/issues/politics/docs/pmo/tbba060406.htm>