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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

STATEMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER

THE RT HON JOHN MAJOR MP

ON THE PUBLICATION OF

**FRAMEWORKS FOR THE FUTURE
IN NORTHERN IRELAND**

HOUSE OF COMMONS

WEDNESDAY 22 FEBRUARY 1995

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With permission, Madam Speaker, I should like to make a statement on Northern Ireland.

Almost every day there brings new evidence of the benefits of peace. The conditions taken for granted elsewhere in the United Kingdom are gradually returning.

But a return to normal life in Northern Ireland requires much more than just a paramilitary ceasefire, important though that step is. It requires a permanent end to violence. And it requires a balanced political settlement under which all parts of the community can live alongside each other without fear or antagonism.

That is the purpose of the Talks process, started in 1991. We need to seek new arrangements for the internal government of Northern Ireland, and for the relationships between North and South, and between the two Governments.

The British Government has discussed these matters at length with the Northern Ireland political parties and with the Irish Government. I should like to pay tribute to the role played by my RHF the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and my RHF the Minister of State. Today we have published proposals in two framework documents, copies of which have been placed in the Library.

Let me make clear from the outset that nothing in these documents will be imposed. The aim is to assist discussion and negotiation with the parties in Northern Ireland. It is not an immutable blueprint.

I urge all Hon Members, and people across Northern Ireland, to read the documents carefully. The proposals in them have been the subject of a number of leaks and misrepresentations, which have resurrected old fears. When people study the documents they should see that those fears are unfounded.

They will see that these proposals are based throughout on the principle of consent. It is made absolutely clear that Northern Ireland will remain a part of the United Kingdom for so long as that is the wish of the people of Northern Ireland. I am a Unionist who wants peace for all the people of the Union. I cherish Northern Ireland's role within the Union. I have no intention whatsoever of letting that role change unless it is the democratic wish of the people of Northern Ireland to do so.

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Strand 1

Madam Speaker, let me turn to the documents published today. I will begin with Strand 1, which sets out the Government's ideas for restoring local democracy in Northern Ireland as part of a full political settlement. This paper has been prepared after consultation and Talks with the main political parties in Northern Ireland. The Irish Government played no part in its formulation.

The circumstances in Northern Ireland are unique within the United Kingdom, as has long been recognised. There are two traditions with very different political aspirations. What is needed is a structure of Government that combines democratic legitimacy with a system of checks and balances. This calls for mechanisms different from those appropriate in the rest of the United Kingdom.

It was these historical differences that meant that, until 1972, there was a Northern Ireland Assembly with a wide range of functions. But since then, those functions have been the direct responsibility of central government - unlike elsewhere in the United Kingdom, where many of them are carried out by elected local authorities. In Northern Ireland, local accountability has been lost, and political talent unused.

That is why the Government is now putting forward plans for a new elected assembly there, with responsibilities over a range of subjects at least as wide as in 1972. The proposals envisage that the assembly might have a single chamber of about 90 members elected for a four or five year term. To reflect the special circumstances of Northern Ireland, they would be elected by a form of proportional representation. Where appropriate, decisions in the Assembly would be taken by a weighted majority.

There would be a system of Committees to oversee the work of the Northern Ireland departments. And there would be a separate panel elected from across the whole of Northern Ireland, with a consultative, monitoring and representational role.

The new Assembly would not have tax-raising powers, and would receive its funding from central Government. It would have legislative powers for the functions transferred to it, though it would be for consideration whether it would assume legislative powers from day one, or whether such responsibility would be transferred progressively.

The Assembly would have responsibility for functions that are, in many cases, devolved to local Government elsewhere in the United Kingdom, including education and housing. Policing and security matters would, however, remain the responsibility of the United Kingdom Government and of this Parliament, at

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least for so long as the terrorist threat makes the active support of the army necessary.

Strand 2

I now turn to Strand 2, the arrangements for North/South co-operation. We have today published a Joint Framework Document which has been agreed with the Irish Government. This sets out a series of proposals as a basis for discussion.

One crucial component is that, as part of an overall agreement, the Irish Government has committed itself to introducing and supporting proposals to amend Articles 2 and 3 of its constitution. These amendments would fully reflect the principle of consent in Northern Ireland. Paragraph 21 of the Joint Framework Document spells out that they would:

"demonstrably be such that no territorial claim of right to jurisdiction over Northern Ireland contrary to the will of a majority of its people is asserted".

That intention is unambiguous and was reaffirmed by the Taoiseach this morning.

For its part, the British Government would in these circumstances enshrine in our legislation the principle that Northern Ireland's future should reflect the wishes of its people. This would be done either by amending existing legislation or by introducing new legislation. This would not affect the United Kingdom's sovereignty over Northern Ireland, which could only be changed by further primary legislation.

The Joint Framework Document also sets out proposals for a new North/South body which could carry out a range of consultative, harmonising or executive functions. It would not have free standing authority: it would be accountable to the Northern Ireland Assembly and to the Irish Parliament respectively. The Northern Ireland members of the body would be drawn from relevant elected Heads of Department from the Northern Ireland Assembly, and would naturally reflect policies determined by the Assembly.

Madam Speaker, fears have been expressed that this body would in effect give the Irish Government joint sovereignty over Northern Ireland. That is emphatically not the case. It is a proposal for cooperation by agreement between Northern Ireland's representatives and their counterparts in the Republic. Decisions in the body could only be taken where there was agreement North and South. There is no question of a majority out-voting a

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minority. The Northern Ireland Assembly and the Irish Parliament would each therefore have an absolute safeguard against proposals it did not approve of.

The North/South body would be established by legislation in this Parliament and in the Irish Parliament. It would discharge or oversee only such functions as were designated for it. There is no predetermined list of those functions: that would be decided only after discussion and agreement with the political parties in Northern Ireland. And it would be for the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Irish Parliament to decide whether any additional functions should subsequently be designated.

The Document also sets out how European Community programmes might be handled in a North/South body. It envisages that the North/South body would be responsible for implementing and managing those programmes which are explicitly designed on a cross-border or island-wide basis. There are currently very few such programmes. Otherwise, the North/South body would have primarily an advisory role.

The House will wish to be reassured that responsibility for determining policy towards the European Union, and for representing Northern Ireland in the European Union, would remain as now with the United Kingdom Government.

Strand 3

Let me now turn to Strand 3, where the Joint Framework Document sets out proposals for future relations between the British and Irish Governments.

These envisage that the Anglo-Irish Agreement would be replaced by a new Agreement between the two Governments. As now, there would be a continuing Intergovernmental Conference, with a permanent secretariat. The IGC would be the forum in which the two Governments would jointly keep the new arrangements under review.

It would be open to either Government to bring up concerns about breaches of the new arrangements, and to discuss how they might be resolved. This is the so-called "default mechanism". But there is no question of this process giving the Irish Government the right to take action in respect of the internal government of Northern Ireland. The Framework Document explicitly sets out that:

"There would be no derogation from the sovereignty of either Government; each will retain responsibility for the decisions and administration of Government within its own jurisdiction."

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Next Steps

Madam Speaker, as I have emphasised, these documents are intended as a contribution to the Talks process. They set out ideas that the Government believe represent a balanced and realistic way forward that could command support across a wide political spectrum in Northern Ireland.

The next step will be for further negotiations to take place with the political parties in Northern Ireland. In those negotiations, others will be free to put forward their own proposals. I very much hope that everyone will agree to negotiate seriously. There is too much at stake for any group to stand aside from the talks.

If agreement is reached in those negotiations, the outcome will be put for approval to the people of Northern Ireland in a referendum. I should equally make clear that there is no question of putting proposals to a referendum before there is agreement among the main political parties.

There is a triple safeguard against any proposals being imposed on Northern Ireland:

- first, any proposals must command the support of the political parties in Northern Ireland;
- second, any proposals must then be approved by the people of Northern Ireland in a referendum;
- and third, any necessary legislation must be passed by this Parliament.

This provides a triple lock designed to ensure that nothing is implemented without consent.

Madam Speaker, the prize from a successful outcome to the peace process is immense. We want to see the people of Northern Ireland permanently free from the fear of terrorist violence. We want to see institutions that reflect the different traditions in Northern Ireland in a manner acceptable to all. And we want to enshrine the principle, both North and South, that no change in Northern Ireland's constitutional position can take place without the consent of the people of Northern Ireland.

I believe these documents make an important contribution to that process, and I commend them to the House.