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## Prologue

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The 10 April 1998 – Good Friday in the Christian calendar – dawned cold and grey at Castle Buildings, a nondescript civil-service building at Stormont on the eastern edge of Belfast. Inside were the United Kingdom and Irish premiers, the Rt. Hon. Tony Blair MP and Bertie Ahern TD, and the leaders of eight Northern Ireland political parties; outside, there was a growing global media village. A midnight deadline had passed without any puffs of white smoke signalling agreement.

An astute observer would have spotted an invigorated John Hume MP MEP, leader of the nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), touring the press tents, following a meeting in the early hours with the Rt. Hon. David Trimble MP, leader of the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP). The same person might have noticed the Sinn Féin leaders, Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness (both abstentionist MPs<sup>1</sup>), avoiding media opportunities. There was no sign of the Rev. Dr Ian Paisley MP MEP, leader of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP); he had walked out of the all-party negotiations, as they were then called, the previous July (with Robert McCartney QC MP of the United Kingdom Unionist Party (UKUP)); and had been banned overnight by the secretary of state, the Rt. Hon. Marjorie ‘Mo’ Mowlam MP, from the grey-hutted press centre in the car park at Castle Buildings.

Inside, the armies of advisers, supporters and others in the parties’ rooms continued to watch the watchers, on the televisions supplied to the talks’ participants by the Northern Ireland Office (NIO).

There was no sign of the two heads of government for much of the day. Then, in the late afternoon, Alistair Campbell, the prime minister’s press secretary, came out to brief the media; a document had been agreed finally after nearly two years of talks, covering apparently – what were called – the Strand One (internal United Kingdom<sup>2</sup>), Strand Two (north-south) and Strand Three (east-west) institutions, plus constitutional issues and a miscellany of matters dealing with terrorism and democracy.

Inside Castle Buildings, in the fourth-level conference room (where a pooled television camera had been installed to broadcast a short ceremony), the United States chairman, Senator George Mitchell, with his colleagues, General John de Chastelain of Canada, and Prime Minister Harri Holkeri of Finland, opened the final plenary of the negotiations at 17.05. The prime minister and the taoiseach were also in attendance, with their government delegations.

The chairman asked if there were any amendments to the multi-party agreement, final copies of which had been distributed to all parties that morning. Sinn Féin

- 1 Application 39511/98: *McGuinness v United Kingdom* (8 June 1999, unreported), European Court of Human Rights.
- 2 Conceived originally as internal Northern Ireland relations.

stated it had a number of concerns, which were annexed subsequently to the summary record of the session.<sup>3</sup> The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) also had an issue of concern.<sup>4</sup>

Senator Mitchell then proceeded to a vote on the final agreement, under procedural rule 34. Sinn Féin stated that it would not be voting, as it had to report back to its *ard chomhairle* (or national executive). 'It said that it would let the Chairman know the outcome of its deliberations in due course.' The UUP explained that it would be reporting to the Ulster Unionist Council on 18 April 1998. The United Kingdom government, followed by the Irish government, assented to the multi-party agreement. Each party, in alphabetic order, was then asked to vote. The Alliance Party, Labour,<sup>5</sup> the NIWC and the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) did so in favour. Sinn Féin said it would register its vote when instructed to do so. The SDLP, Ulster Democratic Party (UDP) and UUP (referring to its caveats) voted last in favour of the agreement. The chairman declared that sufficient consensus (under the rules of the talks) had been achieved.

The prime minister and taoiseach then thanked the independent chairmen. They thanked the Northern Ireland parties. And the party leaders paid tribute to the three chairmen and two heads of government. Senator Mitchell declared the plenary closed *sine die*.

The cameras, however, had started broadcasting earlier than intended, and there was live television coverage of the end of this final session of the talks.

It was at 17.36 that Senator Mitchell – commencing the brief ceremony – announced that 'the two Governments, and the political parties of Northern Ireland, ha[d] reached agreement'. He went on to address the people watching at home: 'If you support this agreement, and if you also reject the merchants of death and the purveyors of hate, if you make it clear to your political leaders that you want them to make it work, then it will.'<sup>6</sup>

It was next the turn of the party leaders (in order of electoral support). 'We rise from this table', David Trimble said, 'knowing that the Union is stronger than it was when we first sat down. We know that the fundamental act of union is there intact.'<sup>7</sup> 'There can be a new dawn in politics on this island', said John Hume. '... It will be a new agreed Ireland in which the rights and interests of both the nationalist and unionist traditions, and others, will be safeguarded and cherished.'<sup>8</sup> Gerry Adams stated: 'we remain absolutely committed to our Irish republican objectives ... British policy in Ireland has manifestly failed. Partition has failed. The decades of unionist rule in the north were exclusive and partisan.'

The Sinn Féin president announced that he would take the document back to

3 Summary Record of Final Plenary Session – Friday 10 April 1998 (17.05). The Sinn Féin comments are at Annex A.

4 Summary Record of Final Plenary Session – Friday 10 April 1998 (17.05). Annex B.

5 This is not part of the (British) Labour Party led by Tony Blair.

6 Statement, 10 April 1998, Office of the Independent Chairmen.

7 *Irish Times*, 11 April 1998. This report differs from the text David Trimble published subsequently: *Fordham International Law Journal*, 22, 4, April 1999, pp. 1169–70.

8 *Irish Times*, 11 April 1998.



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his party: 'When we have democratically come to a conclusion we will let you know.'<sup>9</sup>

The parties were followed by the heads of government. At a table especially set up in the room, Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern (attended by officials) signed the two originals of the British-Irish Agreement, to which would be annexed the agreement reached in the multi-party negotiations. Marjorie 'Mo' Mowlam, and David Andrews, the Irish foreign minister, also signed.

The prime minister and taoiseach then held a joint press conference outside Castle Buildings (the photograph of them shaking hands appears on the cover of this book). 'I said when I arrived here that I felt the hand of history upon us.' The prime minister continued: 'Today I hope that the burden of history can at long last start to be lifted from our shoulders.'<sup>10</sup>

9 *Irish Times*, 11 April 1998; see also, Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness's addresses, 18 April 1998. At its ardfhéis (conference) in Dublin on 18-19 April 1998, the leadership temporized; Gerry Adams said of the agreement: 'This is not a settlement. It is transitional. It is an accommodation. It can be a basis for advancement.' The ardfhéis was adjourned to 10 May 1998 in Dublin. The ard chomhairle (national executive) proposed two resolutions: the first amending the party's constitution, to allow successful candidates to take their seats in the Northern Ireland assembly; the second calling for 'yes' votes in the 22 May referendums. Sinn Féin continued to oppose the central concept of consent in the Belfast Agreement. (All relevant texts available at <http://sinnfein.ie>.)

10 *Irish Times*, 11 April 1998.