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SPEECH TODAY BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND,  
RT HON PETER BROOKE, MP, TO THE BANGOR TOURIST DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATION  
AND CHAMBER OF TRADE

I said before Christmas that I sensed that there was a new mood developing in the electorate of Northern Ireland and their politicians. I believed that it was just possible that the will might exist to achieve some political progress in the near future. I want today to reflect further on how that progress might now be made.

For some months now I have been talking and listening - as Brian Mawhinney has also been doing, and as we shall continue to do - to politicians in Northern Ireland and others who are influential in their communities. I should like to share with you some of the impressions we have formed.

There is no doubt, it seems to me, that support for constitutional politics remains strong in Northern Ireland. That is so despite the terrorist campaign and the lack of major progress so far towards a political accommodation between the two traditions. Yet some progress has been made, I do believe, by a variety of initiatives and by the good will of many individuals, towards healing the divisions within the community. We all welcome that and want to see further progress. And many politicians in Northern Ireland see the need for both sides

of the community to work together at the political level. They see the direct benefits that would arise for the community as a whole from local accountability for government functions.

While I and my colleagues will continue to do all that we can to deliver good government to the people of Northern Ireland, there is a limit to what we can achieve without the greater involvement of locally elected representatives.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the local political scene is the absence of a forum here in which local politicians can help to find solutions to the problems which face those they represent. I feel that absence keenly. But I suggest that the absence of such a forum is, or should be, most keenly felt by local politicians themselves and those whom they represent. Certainly, the discussions which I have held with politicians do suggest that there continues to be widespread support for the devolution of legislative and executive powers, although some favour more limited initial steps in that direction.

I should like to say a little more about how I see the current position.

I have been listening carefully to what Unionist politicians have been saying. I am sure that, like all democratic politicians, they want to be involved in action and not just in words. I understand of course their overriding concern which is, by definition, to see the Union preserved; and I hope that I understand, if I do not share, the feelings they have expressed about the Anglo-Irish Agreement. I do not believe they would serve their own interests, or those of the people they represent, by some sort of internal exile. And I have noted the increasing emphasis of Unionists in what they have been saying on the need for them to share more fully in decision-taking, whether at Westminster or more locally.

Although there are differing views about the form and extent of devolution, there does seem to be a common recognition that there is a

real need for powers to be devolved; and that any form of devolution must involve a proper role for both sides of the Northern Ireland community. Unionists have also made clear that they accept that there needs to be a good and neighbourly relationship between any new Northern Ireland administration and the Republic of Ireland, and a similarly good relationship between the United Kingdom and the Republic.

The leadership of the two main Unionist parties have told me that they stand by the 'outline proposal' which they put to Mr King almost two years ago for a replacement of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Their ideas about the future government of Northern Ireland were subsequently described by the Prime Minister as a "constructive" and "encouraging" starting-point for talks between the Northern Ireland political parties.

I therefore welcome the continuing commitment of the Unionist leadership to seek progress from that starting-point. I also welcome the concern of other Unionist politicians to develop their thinking on these lines and to find ways to enable talks between the parties to start. I recognise that Unionists have been seeking a commitment from the Government to consider a replacement to the Agreement, and that they would like the workings of the Agreement to be suspended for a temporary period to enable political talks to start.

However, my main impression from contacts with Unionist politicians is the strength of interest which exists in seeking a better form of government for Northern Ireland, in which local elected representatives - from both sides of the community - can share on a basis which is fair to all. Detailed proposals for a new devolved administration have been put forward in the past, and take various forms, some of them reflected in the constitutional legislation which remains on the statute books. The most recent proposals to be published are in fact those of the Alliance Party, which has for many years argued forcefully for devolution on a basis which gives an appropriate share in power to both communities.

The SDLP for its part fully supports the Anglo-Irish Agreement and the relationship of trust and cooperation between the two governments which it represents, particularly because of the reassurance which the Agreement provides to the nationalist community. In recent months SDLP politicians have themselves been stressing the advantages of a devolved form of government in which both sides of the community would be represented. They acknowledge the importance of bridging the communal divide and creating a system of government in which representatives of the two communities can work successfully together. The SDLP accepts that Unionists wish to retain their own political and cultural identity, as nationalists do theirs. They recognise, and have said forcefully, that progress can only be achieved through a dialogue. SDLP politicians have stressed to me that they are keen to help to bring that about and to participate in it fully, with a view to achieving devolution. I welcome this and look forward to a more detailed and developed expression of their views.

It does appear, however, that common ground exists about the major issues which talks between the political parties would need to address. There need to be devised workable and acceptable arrangements for the exercise of devolved powers over a range of matters. There needs to be agreement on democratic institutions which would give appropriate weight to majority and minority aspirations and views. There is the question which is addressed by the Anglo-Irish Agreement: how the legitimate interest of the Irish Government in matters within Northern Ireland, particularly as regards the minority community, are to be acknowledged, without dilution of UK sovereignty or the status of Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom. And there is the question of a local political contribution to security matters.

It is of course for the parties themselves in the first instance to say whether these issues might usefully form the bones of an agenda for talks between them. I shall be very willing to give them any help that they want in setting that agenda, but I do suggest that there are certain realities which they cannot ignore. And the prospects for

eventual agreement will depend on the politicians themselves. Some of their aspirations may be different, but it may be that the practical differences which divide them are not unbridgable. Perhaps I could set out some of the principles which might guide them and the Government in seeking a way forward.

Northern Ireland will not cease to be a part of the United Kingdom without the consent of a majority of the people who live here. That has been the position in British law for forty years and it is reinforced by Article 1 of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Majority desire for a change in status clearly does not exist at present and seems unlikely in the foreseeable future. That is the reality which I believe that all constitutional politicians in Northern Ireland in practice accept.

Within that constitutional framework, therefore, the Government will continue to seek, for all the people of Northern Ireland, the fruits of peace, order and good government. All the constitutional political parties also share those objectives, and they are likely to be best served by the greater localisation of political power.

We therefore seek institutions of government in Northern Ireland which will be directly accountable to the people of Northern Ireland - to all its people - and to which they can give their wholehearted commitment and support. The Government has not prejudged the detailed form that any such political arrangements should take. Those arrangements which local politicians are expected to work they must help create. Our only broad criteria for endorsing any particular arrangement which might be proposed are that it should be workable, and likely to prove stable and durable; and that it must command widespread support and provide an appropriate and fair role for both sides of the community.

It seems likely in practice that the best hope of this lies through a devolved Province-wide administration and legislature, though the Government will look seriously at any proposal that is workable and



ould achieve widespread support. The policy of devolution is not of course a new one. It pre-dates the Agreement. Indeed, it has been the policy of successive British governments since 1972. The powers to be devolved can only be decided, after appropriate consultation, by the British Government and Parliament. It is simply not true, as some assert, that Article 4 of the Agreement gives the Irish Government some sort of veto. The authority rests with Parliament at Westminster.

Matters transferred to a new devolved administration would of course be outside the purview of the Intergovernmental Conference. To those who doubt that the Agreement permits this, I should point out that, on the contrary, the Agreement provides for it. The relationship between any new Northern Ireland administration and the Irish authorities would of course be an issue for discussions involving both parties.

Finally, I would say this about the our general approach. There can be no denying the existence of the two main traditions in Northern Ireland and the need for each to respect the other and to be given its proper place. The Anglo-Irish Agreement represents an honest attempt to grapple with that reality, without confusing the constitutional reality of continued UK sovereignty; and, since the nationalist community regards itself at least in part as Irish, it is natural and can be helpful that there should be an Irish dimension to Northern Irish affairs. Let us remember too, and I say this not only to Unionists, that the different traditions can be a source of strength and vitality, rather than division and weakness.

Against that background, how can we now make progress? I have sought to indicate the issues which need to be discussed between the parties and the principles which might inform our and their approach. The problems we face together can only be resolved by the political parties talking together and with the Government.

The Government has said - and I repeat - that we set no preconditions for such talks. I have recognised that some may join the discussions, intending to raise issues for consideration which we would not necessarily wish to raise ourselves; and I have also made it clear

That I am always ready to consider constructive proposals particularly where they enjoy a wide measure of support. It seems self-evident that discussions about the future government of Northern Ireland would need to embrace both the concept of devolution and the North-South relationship, and it is impossible to ignore the wider relationship between the two islands.

There can be no doubt that in practice, any agreement between the constitutional political parties on new arrangements for exercising political power in Northern Ireland would have substantial implications for the Anglo-Irish Agreement, and both Governments would, I believe, be bound to consider those implications seriously and sympathetically. The two Governments have already stated formally that, if in future it appeared that the objectives of the Agreement could more effectively be served by changes in the scope and nature of the working of the Conference, the two Governments would be willing in principle to consider making such changes. I do believe, as we have often said, that the Agreement can be operated sensitively, in the interests of bringing about talks between the political parties and giving them the best possible chance of success.

But so much depends on the will of politicians and those they represent to seek agreement between them. There is already a substantial exchange of views between local politicians and the Government about how progress might now be made. I hope that very soon all the main constitutional political parties will be involved in such exchanges with the Government, and with each other, on these very important matters. I stand ready to facilitate agreement on the arrangements for inter-party talks, and to discuss the steps the Government might take to help.

I would not wish to raise hopes unduly. Much work needs to be done, but there may now in my judgement be enough common ground to make worthwhile the start of talks soon on new arrangements for exercising political power within Northern Ireland. I do hope that politicians here will make the most of the opportunity which may now exist. I look forward to their considered responses to what I have had to say.



Public commitments to political progress - and private ones - are no substitute for engaging in genuine political dialogue. The eventual prize for success in such a dialogue would be a form of government which was widely acceptable and contributed substantially to long term political stability. Local politicians, by demonstrating their ability to work together, would be helping to bring an end to terrorism. A successful devolved government would of course also improve Northern Ireland's image as a location for investment and business expansion, and help us to attract the new jobs that we want to see for all in the community. It would help all the people of Northern Ireland to tackle and reduce the divisions between the two sides of the community. And it would in particular ensure that decisions about the day to day business of government would be more directly responsive to local needs and requirements.