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NORTHERN IRELAND Information Service

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THE PROSPECTS FOR A POLITICAL ACCOMMODATION

As a politician, I associate the end of July with the ending of the Parliamentary session and thus the advent of the holiday season. This is therefore perhaps an appropriate moment for me to look back over the events of recent months in Northern Ireland and, in particular, to review what has been happening in the political arena. The political talks, quite rightly, captured the imagination of the Province at large, and beyond, and although some commentators have seen the end of these particular talks as the closing of a chapter of policy by HMG, I believe that the pursuit of these policies must be continued. Each step in the process on which we have embarked is useful groundwork. I believe that we have already identified common ground and that we can enlarge it. Lessons too have been learnt.

I should like to begin by outlining the Government's overall aims and objectives in Northern Ireland. It bears repetition that our over-riding mission is to deliver good government for the Province. Our first priority is the defeat of terrorism within Northern Ireland, from whichever side of the community it comes. As a Government we are totally committed to eliminating terrorism from Northern Ireland.

At the same time, we attach high importance to programmes for developing economic prosperity in Northern Ireland, tackling social need and encouraging good community relations. There remain significant social and economic differences within Northern Ireland;

and the Government is fully committed to ensuring equality of opportunity and equity of treatment for all. We have made intense efforts to tackle the problem of discrimination, particularly in employment. Further, as I stated last February, we are targeting resources to diminish disadvantage in the community. We shall also continue to seek a widely accepted base for political accommodation within Northern Ireland.

None of these issues can or should be tackled in isolation; political, social, economic and security developments are interlinked and must progress together on a broad, coherent front. The Government is implementing an integrated set of policies to produce the greatest benefits for all the people of Northern Ireland.

I have said our mission is to deliver good government for the Province. But whatever our own performance under direct rule, it is in the Government's view preferable in principle that a greater measure of responsibility should be exercised by local people operating locally accountable institutions. The broad aim of our political policy is to break down divisions and distrust within the community in Northern Ireland and between the peoples of these islands and to work towards a new basis on which locally - elected representatives could take greater responsibility for the affairs of Northern Ireland within a wider framework of stable relationships. The absence of political institutions functioning at regional level, together with the fact that few significant powers are exercised at District Council level, means that below the level of Parliament at Westminster there is less democratic accountability for the administration of Northern Ireland than is desirable. But our policy must be conducted against certain political realities. I will touch on each of them.

The first reality is the constitutional status of Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland is a part of the United Kingdom in domestic and international law. This is so because it is the clear

wish of the majority of the people of Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland's status as part of the United Kingdom will not change unless and until a majority of the people here want it, and that seems unlikely for the foreseeable future. As well as our domestic law, the Anglo-Irish Agreement also deals with this, though I acknowledge that it does so in a way not everyone finds reassuring. The preamble to the Agreement distinguishes between "those who wish for no change in the present status of Northern Ireland" and "those who aspire to a sovereign united Ireland achieved by peaceful means and through consent": against that background, Article 1(a)'s affirmation "that any change in the status of Northern Ireland would only come about with the consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland" is clear and unambiguous.

This is consistent with the principle of self determination. One corollary is, of course, that we also acknowledge the possibility of a future change in the status of Northern Ireland. One form of change which is regularly canvassed and which attracts substantial support in the Nationalist community would centre on a closer relationship between the two parts of Ireland. Given the existence of that body of opinion, this Government has committed itself in the Anglo-Irish Agreement to the proposition that if a majority of the people of Northern Ireland were clearly to wish for, and formally consent to, a united Ireland they would introduce and support legislation to give effect to that wish. This is entirely consistent with the general principles of consent and self-determination to which the Government is committed. It reflects the reality that we have no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland which could override those principles. Some would argue that, in accordance with the principle of self-determination we should be ready to acknowledge that a majority in Northern Ireland might choose different arrangements; and these may be canvassed further if there are new political talks.

A second and equally important political reality is that Northern Ireland has a divided community and has suffered from the

absence of political arrangements which would allow representatives of both main parts of the community to play a full and effective role in the political life of the Province. There are two main traditions and two main identities, of different strengths but of equal validity. Both traditions need to be given full recognition by the other so that they can be accommodated in the political system here, taking account of the wider framework of relationships within these islands. Moreover, the creation of local institutions which accommodated both traditions would provide a forum in which politicians from all sides of the community could effect a practical and lasting accommodation.

Wider relationships which, to some extent, reflect these divisions in the community, also constitute central political realities. The relationship between Northern Ireland on the one hand, and Great Britain and the United Kingdom Government and Parliament on the other, will continue to be of central importance. This arises not only from the Government's provision of adequate financial and security resources, but also from the responsibility of Government and Parliament for matters which are not transferred to any local institutions. It is also because many in Northern Ireland see themselves as part of a British identity within a wider archipelago.

The relationship with the Irish Republic is also of continuing importance. The two parts of Ireland derive practical benefits from co-operation on security and economic matters and in areas like health, tourism, sport and many others. Everyone in Ireland could gain from the development of yet more harmonious and friendly relationships within the island. The Irish Government, moreover, has an understandable interest in the affairs of Northern Ireland arising from a range of political, geographical and historical factors. The affinities between the minority side of the community in Northern Ireland and the people of the Republic are a potent political reality which must be taken into account. Many of these factors are reflected in the Anglo-Irish Agreement, itself another reality of the present position.

There is also the unique relationship between the people of the United Kingdom and of the Republic of Ireland, based on their shared history and close family, trading, political, cultural and other links. Both countries share a common interest in maintaining and developing stable relationships within this archipelago and in defeating terrorism.

The two countries' common membership of the European Community points to a further political reality: the increasing extent to which decisions about many issues within the area of Community competence are significantly influenced by decisions taken at European level. This does not mean that frontiers will disappear after 1992 or that sovereignty will shift extensively away from the nation state as we know it. What it does do is to enable the two parts of Ireland to look to the future and approach their common problems as part of a common entity.

It is also necessary to face up to the reality of the terrorist challenge. Terrorism in support of a change in the constitutional status of Northern Ireland and terrorism in reaction to this have blighted the political life of Northern Ireland, exacerbating and deepening the inter-communal divisions. It is axiomatic that everyone in the community has a right to expect that proper steps will be taken to protect them from terrorism. Equally, the police and armed forces must conduct themselves in ways which ensure that they secure and retain the confidence of the public at large. It is a welcome reality that the elected representatives of the vast majority of the people of Northern Ireland and of the Republic of Ireland are united in their condemnation and rejection of terrorism and their commitment to the democratic process. As a Government we shall continue to work closely with the Irish Government to ensure that a concerted effort is made to protect all the people of Northern Ireland.

It is clear to me that a prosperous, stable community with effective local political institutions would undermine the

motivation of many terrorists by making it harder for terrorists to obtain from the community the practical and moral support they require. Determined and effective security force action will continue to be a central component in bringing terrorism to an end but law and order could more effectively be maintained in Northern Ireland if there were a greater basic political consensus leading to wider public support for and confidence in the security forces. To my mind the events of recent weeks, when the four main political parties sat around the same table to discuss their common future, brought home very clearly that the way to bring stability to Northern Ireland is through the constitutional process. By its nature terrorism is destructive and therefore has nothing to contribute to the efforts that are being made to create a better future for Northern Ireland.

The final reality I want to draw your attention to today is the impossibility of tackling these issues independently. The network of relationships I have mentioned needs to be viewed as a whole. Experience has shown that an undue concentration on one set of relationships can distort the others.

It was in the light of these realities that my predecessor Tom King responded to the Unionists leaders' proposal for "talks about talks" and subsequently invited Brian Mawhinney, now the Minister of State, to undertake a round of informal discussions with leading politicians and opinion formers during the spring and summer of 1989. It was those earlier exchanges I had in mind when I said at Bangor, in January 1990, that I believed there was sufficient common ground between the parties to make talks worthwhile.

There then followed a long process of bilateral discussions between myself and the leaders of the four main constitutional political parties in Northern Ireland and with the Irish Government to establish a generally acceptable basis for talks which would

protect everyone's essential political interests. That resulted in my statement of 26 March which set out an agreed basis for political talks in relation to Northern Ireland which would address, as part of the same process, all three main sets of relationships involved. The structure was consistent with the political realities I have already identified. It involved all the key political interests. It provided a mechanism capable of addressing the entire political agenda. The "three - stranded" approach enabled relevant issues (whether "internal", "North/South" or "East/West") to be addressed by relevant interests on a basis which all found acceptable. The acknowledgment that nothing could be agreed in any one strand until everything was agreed in the talks as a whole acknowledged the reality that the issues are all inter-related; that there are trade-offs to be made between the different elements on the political agenda; and that all the participants would need to know the shape of the overall package before they could reach a firm view on the outcome of the talks. The statement also referred to the need for the outcome to secure popular validation.

As you know, the talks began at Parliament Buildings on 30 April and concluded on 3 July. Those talks did not, regrettably, proceed to plenary exchanges as rapidly as had been hoped but once round-table discussions did begin, on 17 June, significant conversations took place. All the participants agreed that the talks were valuable and had produced genuine dialogue. At the beginning of this month it became clear, however, that it was not going to be possible to launch the later strands of the talks or to complete the process as a whole before the end of the period set aside for the talks, and that this was inhibiting our ability to make further substantive progress. In those circumstances it was agreed that the talks should be brought to an orderly conclusion in the hope that this would preserve a foundation for further constructive political exchanges in the future.

I have already paid tribute to the determination and seriousness of purpose of all involved in the talks process. All

four parties involved and the Irish Government showed real commitment which enabled us, together, to tackle and overcome the apparent obstacles which arose before 26 March and then to deal with the difficult issues which arose after 30 April. If any one of the parties or the Irish Government had not been determined to make progress towards constructive political dialogue we would not have got as far as we did. I should also like to take this opportunity to repeat my tribute to the courage of the Northern Ireland political leaders. The talks were intended to deal with some extremely difficult and sensitive issues about which people in the community in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland feel very strongly. I appreciate the moral and political courage displayed by all concerned.

My preliminary conclusions are broadly positive. I believe the experience of the talks between the parties in the latter part of June has validated the three - stranded approach. Although there were evident difficulties, the talks also showed that the four parties and the two Governments are capable of tackling and resolving sensitive issues, and the talks saw the beginnings of a new and serious political dialogue. I believe there is now a greater real understanding among constitutional politicians in Northern Ireland about the views of others around the table on the major issues at the heart of the communal divide in Northern Ireland. I would go so far as to claim that there is greater mutual respect. There was the beginning of a political engagement with real potential for the future.

When I announced the end of the talks on 3 July, however, there were some people who jumped to the immediate conclusion that the whole process had been misconceived and had therefore worked its way to inevitable failure. Others in turn came forward with suggestions that the Government should try different approaches. These covered a broad spectrum of ideas, ranging from making Direct Rule permanent (1)

to maximising the application of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Others suggested that the Government should impose a solution or that there should be closer integration of the affairs of Northern Ireland and Great Britain.

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I respect those different opinions. From the Government's point of view, however, I have to say that, much though Direct Rule has to commend it, it must be regarded as deficient in that Ministers have little or no direct political mandate from the people of Northern Ireland. Nor would I regard the idea of imposing a solution as realistic or wise. Any such solution which did not attract widespread support in Northern Ireland would be most unlikely to provide a stable basis for government. There are arguments in favour of closer integration between the affairs of Northern Ireland and Great Britain, but I take leave to doubt whether this approach would command widespread support within Northern Ireland either.

I therefore disagree with those who suggest that we should be attempting a different approach. Given the political realities to which I referred earlier, it seems to me that the basic approach which we have been following in recent months remains the right one, and indeed the only one that carries a real chance of making progress. Any attempt to make progress must involve all those involved in the three sets of relationships identified in my statement of 26 March; they must also be able to raise all the relevant issues and accept that nothing can be capable of agreement until all the participants can give their agreement to any new proposals as a whole. This is thus the only framework in which the ideas of those who seek changes to the Anglo-Irish Agreement and the willingness expressed by the two Governments to consider, in certain circumstances, alternatives to the Agreement, can be explored. Any proposals would also have to be capable of general validation. I am myself convinced therefore that the general approach which was worked out for the recent talks remains the right one.

I should like to say that I have been greatly encouraged by the extent of public support shown for the talks process in Northern Ireland, in Great Britain and in the Republic of Ireland. My Ministerial colleagues and I have experienced this at first hand in meetings with the public and with business, community and church leaders and other public representatives. My post-bag has been full of letters expressing support and good wishes for the talks on which we were engaged. The results of the recent opinion surveys in Northern Ireland, Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland confirmed this evidence. To all those who expressed their positive support for what we were about I should like to say thank you. It was an encouragement to all of us.

Our policy has been to seek political progress through talks involving, in a single process, and on a basis which respects and accommodates differing principles and requirements, all the key politicians and a comprehensive agenda. That is the right policy, because it is based on the political realities, not only as I see them, but as they also seem to many others in the political community. The search for an accommodation must continue. This work is too important to be left undone. I hope all participants will be ready, after the Summer, to pick up the search for a new way forward. For myself, I shall persevere. There is unfinished business. The recent talks were valuable, but they are over. I hope others will feel it worthwhile, starting from where we now are, to come back to the table to take these matters further. In the meantime, I think everyone will be the better for a holiday.