



An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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Mr Speaker, the political talks which have been taking place at Parliament Buildings, Stormont, have been brought to a conclusion. I should like to take this opportunity to explain to the House the background to this decision, to describe what has been achieved during those talks and to set out the Government's hopes for the future.

2. Hon Members will recall that my statement to the House on 26 March was accepted as a basis for political talks which would address, as part of the same process, relationships within Northern Ireland, including the relationship between any new institutions there and the Westminster Parliament; among the people of the island of Ireland; and between the two Governments. I announced that talks would take place in three strands corresponding to those three main sets of relationships. To allow an opportunity for the wider political dialogue which the four main constitutional political parties in Northern Ireland and the two Governments envisaged, the two Governments had agreed not to hold a meeting of the Anglo-Irish Conference between two pre-specified dates, subsequently confirmed as being 26 April and 16 July. This interval, allowing some time at either end for the Anglo-Irish Secretariat to complete the business of servicing one Conference and to make preparations to service the next, provided ten clear weeks for substantive political exchanges. The talks began on 30 April.

3. It has become clear that it would not be possible to launch the other strands of the talks and thus to complete the process as a whole before the end of this interval, and that this was beginning to inhibit our ability to make further substantive progress. After consultation with the leaders of the political parties I concluded that the talks should therefore be brought to an end. I have also been in touch with the Irish Government to recount my conclusion. Mr Speaker, I should now like to take stock of what has been achieved during the talks and of the further prospects for securing constructive political development in relation to Northern Ireland.

4. As the House knows, it did not prove possible to move as rapidly as we had hoped to plenary sessions of the first strand of the talks. A range of new procedural issues had to be resolved. A series of bilateral exchanges succeeded in determining the venues for meetings in the second strand of the talks, arrangements for chairing that strand of discussion, the identity of the Chairman and the procedural guidelines which would be observed.

5. Plenary sessions started on 17 June. After my opening statement the parties presented their initial position papers, after which the papers were discussed, examined and clarified. Subsequently, during a more intensive schedule of meetings, there was a debate on themes which had emerged from the initial presentations.

6. Mr Speaker, the commitment and seriousness of purpose shown by all the parties in these talks is a source of encouragement for the future. The plenary sessions provided the forum for some significant and constructive exchanges among the parties and with Her Majesty's Government on a range of fundamental issues. The nature of those exchanges served to confirm the judgement involved in initiating the talks process that the time is ripe for political talks in relation to Northern Ireland which address all the relevant relationships; that the process is of value and has potentially even greater value; that a degree of common ground exists; and that there is a good prospect that a comprehensive political accommodation can be reached. I would like to express my appreciation of the commitment shown by all the participants.

7. To those who would say "I told you so - it would never work" I offer the reality of the past few weeks. While I am naturally disappointed at this moment that the current process has to end, foundations have been laid for progress in the future which neither cynics nor the men of violence will be able to undermine.

8. Mr Speaker, for myself I hope that it will prove possible in due course to have further exchanges with the parties, and with the Irish Government, to explore, initially on a bilateral basis, whether we can establish terms on which fresh discussions could be held.