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Mr N Hamilton

NORTHERN IRELAND Information Service

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT

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SPEECH TODAY BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND,
RT HON PETER BROOKE, MP, AT THE CURRENT AFFAIRS SOCIETY,
ST LOUIS GRAMMAR SCHOOL, BALLYMENA

I am delighted to be here in one of the most renowned schools in Northern Ireland. Faced with this mixed audience, it is tempting to wonder what the first girls-only classes in 1924 would have made of this! Since St Louis' is now approaching the 21st birthday of going co-educational, it seems clear that handling the diversity implicit in such a system has been a success. But 1924, although far away, is worth a few seconds' recollection: then, as now, there was uncertainty and mistrust in the body politic. Then, the Troubles cast a deep shadow; now, we are still in the midst of strife that has gone on for 20 years. In my address to you today, I want to offer some thoughts on where I would like to see political developments going over the next few weeks. I believe that, given political commitment on all sides, it remains possible to take a major step towards accommodating political differences and resolving them in a way which does not threaten anybody's essential interests: in other words, to make diversity a source of strength rather than a seed bed of strife.

Last January, in a speech I gave in Bangor, I set out the underlying political realities of the situation in Northern Ireland and explained why I believed it was right to seek to transfer political power, authority and responsibility to locally-elected representatives in Northern Ireland. Since then many politicians, and non-politicians, in Northern Ireland have told me of their desire to make progress in this direction.

The people of Northern Ireland deserve a greater say over their own affairs. There needs to be a greater local democratic input to the business of government in Northern Ireland. This would make government more directly responsive to local requirements and give the people of Northern Ireland a greater sense of involvement in the political affairs of the Province. It would also contribute to a greater sense of community and encourage political responsibility. Indeed, the best long term prospect for achieving political stability within Northern Ireland would be to establish a local administration which both parts of the community could support and sustain.

I also made the point last January that the best basis for transferring political power to elected representatives in Northern Ireland would be one which had been agreed in inter-party talks. Any new institutions will be more durable if those who are expected to operate them have first helped to create them. That approach also stands a better chance of ensuring that any new arrangements accurately reflect political opinion within Northern Ireland. I said last January that I would be happy to play my part in promoting agreement on an agenda for inter-party talks and on a basis on which such talks might take place.

Since then I have had extensive discussions with the leaders of the constitutional political parties in Northern Ireland and with representatives of the Irish Government. Since politics is the art of the possible, my role has been to explore with the parties the extent to which they would find it possible to accommodate each others' views and interests without any sacrifice of principle or of their own essential interests. I have been impressed and encouraged by the readiness of those with whom I have been talking to acknowledge others' positions and to adjust their own position in the interests of finding a way forward.

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Perhaps I could say a word or two about these talks. Not surprisingly a good deal of time has been spent on preliminary issues, since the essential purpose has been to explore the scope for progress and to identify a basis on which more formal talks could be convened. As is well known a number of the potential participants in these talks have various preliminary points of principle - preconditions, in a word - which need first to be addressed. The talks so far have concentrated on finding a basis for launching more formal discussions. But inevitably, and to my mind desirably, we must now have in view the substantive issues: the optimum means of assuring effective and responsive government for Northern Ireland; the most appropriate way of handling issues of joint concern to the people of Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic; and the implications of matters like these for relations between the two Governments, including any implications for the Agreement. I hope to discuss these issues further.

Second, it has been a characteristic of the talks I have held that they have been bilateral. While I believe a number of those involved do indeed talk to each other - and I would certainly encourage them to do so - my main activity has focused on separate bilateral meetings which I have had with the various participants. This has a number of obvious drawbacks, but it has at least enabled a progressive exploration of apparently conflicting positions to be undertaken. It does not, I fear, lend itself to as effective or speedy an exploration as could be undertaken by collective discussions. It also places considerable weight on my ability to understand, to reflect and, in aspiration at least, to reconcile the different views put to me. Nonetheless, for the moment continued further bilateral discussion could enable us to carry the process forward.

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Third, it seems clear to me that Northern Ireland is better served by its constitutional politicians than has perhaps been acknowledged. Politicians on both sides of the community have to face difficulties unknown to politicians elsewhere in the UK, or indeed in the Republic of Ireland. They have both had to maintain the morale of their people through the most horrific events, and to defend the primacy of constitutional politics against a sustained onslaught on it, whilst also facing uniquely difficult political problems. I appreciate too the spirit in which Ministers and constitutional politicians in the Irish Republic have approached these matters.

As is well known the discussions I have held have not so far been brought to fruition. Nonetheless, it is worth recalling what has been achieved. Following my discussions with the constitutional political parties in Northern Ireland and with representatives of the Irish Government it is generally acknowledged that the best chance of securing a comprehensive political accommodation lies through a process of dialogue which involves each of them and addresses all three of the underlying relationships - between both sides of the community in Northern Ireland; between the two parts of Ireland; and between the two sovereign states. It is also accepted that agreement on one part of the process would depend on agreement on the others.

There has also been a large measure of agreement about the various preliminary points of principle and about the structure, format and timing any talks might have. Indeed I have given it as my own judgement that there does now exist a basis for entering talks intended to cover the three relationships; a basis which I believe would meet everyone's political concerns and essential interests and which would allow all participants to enter talks on a basis of mutual respect without any sacrifice of important interests or

essential principles. I have also suggested that, given the political benefits of political dialogue, the outstanding matters which divide the potential participants could be resolved. We are encouragingly close to their resolution.

But ultimately it is of course for others to judge their own position. These are peculiarly important and complex issues. It is entirely understandable that politicians should wish to be confident before they enter any talks that the overall framework and associated understandings do not prejudice their ability to argue forcefully for their particular point of view once the talks actually commence. But I am also conscious of what I sense to be a widespread desire in the community at large to see a return to normal political activity. This is why I feel a particular responsibility to resume the process on which we embarked earlier in the year. I sense also that we have a real opportunity to advance matters, but not one which we can assume will remain open indefinitely.

The catalogue of terrorist atrocities over the past few weeks also compels all politicians to maintain their efforts to find and enlarge the common ground, while acknowledging different views and legitimate diversity. These weeks have seen the murder of three policemen and a nun near Armagh on 24 July, the evil litany of sectarian attacks, punishment shootings, intimidation and racketeering.

They have also seen the murder of my friend and colleague Ian Gow. Other atrocities have not deflected us from our purpose, and this one will not either. We shall continue to pursue the policies we believe to be right.

Against this background of terrorism, as evil as it is futile, the admittedly real differences between the constitutional politicians fade into insignificance when contrasted with the yawning divide between the constitutional politicians and the

terrorists. A political accommodation will not, in itself, bring terrorism to an end. But evident political cooperation would help, in part by demonstrating the democratic alternative to terrorism; just as a continuation of a local political stalemate may perpetuate the communal division on which the terrorists feed.

I and my fellow politicians, at Westminster, in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland, have a duty to explore to the absolute limit any opportunity to secure political progress in relation to Northern Ireland through democratic, constitutional means.

Accordingly, I stand ready to play my part in exploring the scope for political progress. I hope to have further discussions with the leaders of Northern Ireland constitutional political parties and the Irish Government. In doing so I shall seek to be open-minded in examining any opening for progress.

So far, as I have explained, my efforts have concentrated on finding a basis on which formal talks could be launched. I have proceeded on the basis that all the potential participants in such talks must be content with the arrangements. This has meant that each participant shared the power to obstruct progress, if he is willing to accept the responsibility of exercising that power. Paradoxically this has lent strength to the process. However, we may have reached the point where something more positive is needed. In short, I believe that we now require a demonstration of political will on the part of all those in a position to help carry this process forward: a determination to tackle the remaining differences and to make real progress.

I propose to begin with a resumed attempt to find the basis for launching formal talks addressing the triple strands. The "agreement-in-principle" to which we were close clearly needs

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more work done on it before all sides can be confident that their position is fully safeguarded. Everyone needs to be reassured, for example, that if formal talks do begin all sides will play a full and constructive part in them. Likewise, everyone has a right to expect that talks will bear upon the real issues relating to the problem, and not simply matters of form and structure. As I have explained, my own view is that agreement on that is close and attainable.

I believe that it is possible to resolve these matters. In any event I hope all will explore with me the substantive issues they believe need to be covered, and how they would fit into the overall framework established so far. I venture to suggest that many of those issues will not be new: how can we address the concerns of the minority community that its voice too can continue to be heard at the highest level of decision-making, for instance, or the concerns of the majority community about Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution?

But even though the issues are not new, for each side to set them out in this way, linked to the framework earlier envisaged, would be a valuable exercise. It would increase the likelihood that we could chart a mutually acceptable path through the various party positions to arrive at a basis that safeguards everyone's essential interests. Both Governments have already pointed out the consequences that a successful outcome to such talks would have for the Agreement.

There are other reasons too for seeking to maintain dialogue. For one thing I have benefited - and I believe Northern Ireland has benefited - from the increased contacts I have had with local political leaders on all sides in recent months. I have learnt much from this dialogue, and the more I can learn of differing views the better, since I am conscious that it may fall to me to attempt to reconcile the different views. I hope to proceed through collective discussions. But in the last

analysis I will not shirk my responsibility for the administration of good government in Northern Ireland. That may indeed require me at some point to set the pace and show the way.

I believe that with commitment and continuing good will the remaining differences between the constitutional politicians can be bridged and the way opened for further political dialogue. Such an outcome would mark a step forward for every constitutional political party and for both Governments. We are not dealing with a situation where what is good for one party is by definition bad for another. On the contrary we have an opportunity to enlarge and develop the common ground for the good of all. We face a challenge and an opportunity which will not last forever: we must seize it. As I have already remarked, we are encouragingly close to agreement on a basis for talks which could secure a greater local political input to the business of governing Northern Ireland, establish a new relationship of trust between Unionism and Nationalism, and strengthen the relationship between the British and Irish Governments.

I am conscious that the present Troubles have been going on longer than any sixth-former here has been alive. All of us engaged in this process have a responsibility to see that when your children are here they will be able to look back at this time and see that an opportunity was not only recognised, but taken.