

I welcome the opportunity afforded by this debate to outline the Government's view of the current Talks.

I am particularly glad that the debate is taking place at a time when the long-awaited transition to Strand Two of the process is about to take place. On behalf of the Government, I greatly welcome the proposal by Sir Patrick Mayhew this afternoon that Strand Two should now be launched and the reported acceptance of this proposal by all concerned. The Government look forward to working actively and constructively in Strand Two, under the independent chairmanship of Sir Ninian Stephen, with a view to ensuring the decisive contribution which Strand Two must make to the outcome of the Talks process as a whole. Strand Two, which involves the two Governments and the four parties in Northern Ireland, is a very important and integral part of the process which was agreed on 26 March 1991. We are very pleased that this crucial phase of the talks has now been reached.

We believe that these talks offer a historic opportunity to begin the work of healing the misunderstandings and antagonisms that have so damaged relationships on this island, and between these islands, over the centuries. We have the chance, with imagination and good will, to start building a basis for an honourable, equitable and lasting accommodation between the two traditions. We have the opportunity for a new beginning that can help signal the end of the strife that has caused so much suffering and hardship to the people of Northern Ireland. I would mislead the House if I said we were certain of success or that the task ahead would be an easy one. The discussions to which we are all committed will be complex and arduous. Once launched, however, the process of dialogue will I hope acquire its own momentum. There is, I believe, a growing acceptance that political dialogue alone offers a way out of the tragedy of Northern Ireland. There is a responsibility on all sides to work together to achieve political arrangements which will enable the people of this island to live together in partnership and trust.



- 2 -

The Government's objective throughout has been to establish a clear and realistic basis for this process and one which would most assist a successful outcome. It is for that reason that the two Governments and the participants have taken such care to put structures in place which would enable discussion not only of the different relationships we have to consider but also of their inter-relationship to each other. It was for that reason that we agreed that the Talks must be framed in the context of the three sets of relationships and for that reason also that we determined that nothing would be agreed until everything is agreed. To protect the position of all participants, it was also agreed that absolute confidentiality would be maintained at every stage of the discussions in all three strands. The House will, therefore, understand if I do not enter into any detail regarding any of the meetings held so far or if I do not anticipate the nature of the discussions which might take place in Strand Two.

The basis of the present process is a recognition by all participants that a lasting accommodation between the unionist and nationalist traditions can only be addressed in the context of the totality of relationships within and between these islands. We have all learned by hard experience that any other approach cannot succeed. It would perhaps be easier if it were otherwise but the Government firmly believes that "a new beginning for relationships" must address all the different dimensions. It must, fundamentally, be grounded on respect for the aspirations and sense of identity of each tradition. Both are entitled to respect an equal measure. Both involve allegiances that transcend the confines of Northern Ireland and no real or durable accommodation is possible unless framed in the context of the wider dimension of relationships within Ireland and between the two islands. In accepting this reality as the basis for the Talks, I believe all sides have already taken a significant step. The challenge that lies ahead for all of us is translating this acknowledgement of the requirements for true



enduring accommodation and partnership into structures that will reflect these realities.

As confirmed in Article One of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, both Governments have fully accepted that the aspirations of each tradition are legitimate and both must be accommodated. The fundamental basis of the present Talks is the need to devise institutions that can accommodate each tradition and take full account of their legitimate aspirations. That is why we must address all the relationships involved and that is why the Governments and the parties have agreed the present process and its structures.

It is central to this approach that neither tradition should be placed in a position of privilege or special status against the other. Both must be treated on an equal basis so that neither feels threatened or challenged by the other. After all the suffering and pain of recent years, I believe that there is now widespread acceptance that this is the only way forward and that trust and equality must be the basis of any new arrangements that emerge from our discussions. Any new institutions can have value only if they are based on the accommodation of differences and give full expression to the rights and aspirations of each tradition.

Unionists and nationalists have to share this island. We have to respect the other's position and understand and respect the aspirations of the other. We have to accept that we will not agree on some things but that the view of each is fully legitimate and must be acknowledged and respected. We have to learn to live in partnership and equality on the island which we share. We have to realise that diversity can be enriching rather than threatening and that no barriers are immutable to people wishing to live together in a relationship of trust and mutual respect. I believe that, whatever the difficulties and challenges yet to be faced, and they are very real, the present



SQ 619

Talks process is taking place because all of us have learned these simple but hard truths.

The Irish Government consider the value of the exchanges in the Talks, and the prospects of their success, will depend on the degree to which they embrace the real scope of the problem. We must base our negotiations on the conflicting aspirations and identities as each tradition itself perceives and defines them, not in the form the other tradition might find it convenient for them to be. We must make our solution fit the problem, not seek to define the problem in terms of the solutions we are prepared to offer. Our approach to the agenda will therefore be both flexible and comprehensive. It is one of the agreed ground rules for the Talks that it will be open to each of the parties to raise any aspect of our relationships, including constitutional issues, or indeed any matter which it considers relevant. We will seek to ensure the Talks are a framework for the fullest possible consideration of all the factors which affect the tragic and intractable problem we have to grapple with. We would hope they will permit a balanced examination of both sides of all the issues which divide the two traditions in Ireland and, ultimately, indicate the ways in which these difficulties can be resolved.

There is much that can build on and much on which we already agree. We agree on the fundamental position that a change in the status of Northern Ireland can only take place with the consent of a majority of its people. We agree that differences between the two traditions can only be accommodated by mutual agreement and accommodation and that any new institutions must reflect this. We agree that those who practice violence in support of political change are our common enemy. We agree in rejecting their futile activities which purport to build a new Ireland, not on respect for different traditions and aspirations, but on foundations of hatred and bloodshed. They are our common enemy and their greatest fear is that, together, we can succeed in



- 5 -

reaching understanding and accommodation between our two traditions.

The goal of reconciliation between the two major traditions in Ireland will, I believe, be significantly assisted by a clear recognition of the substantial common ground which exists between both and between the two parts of Ireland in many areas of practical, day-to-day concern. It is important that we build on the things which already unite the people of the island, North and South. We have joint concerns about the future prosperity and development of the island in the new European context. If maximum advantage is to be taken of the challenges and opportunities which lie ahead in that context, it is essential that Northern Ireland should be developed economically in close conjunction with the rest of the island. Only an approach of this kind will permit the full potential of the economy to be realised in both parts of the island.

The Government are fully conscious of the responsibility that rests on us as on all sides in the current process. We will do our full part to ensure that the endeavours of all participants in the current process will prove worthy of the hopes invested in us by people of both traditions who now want to put an end to misunderstanding and division and reach towards a new beginning. We will do our utmost to put Northern Ireland firmly on the path to peace and the island as a whole on the road to that reconciliation and partnership which has eluded us for so long.