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NORTHERN IRELAND Information Service

TALKS

Text of statement by the Secretary of State, Sir Patrick

Mayhew, MP, to House of Commons:

11 NOVEMBER 1992

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND'S STATEMENT
TO HOUSE OF COMMONS - 11 NOVEMBER 1992

With permission, Madam Speaker, I should like to make a statement about the political Talks concerning Northern Ireland.

These Talks were built on those which were held last year. Like them, they took as groundrules my predecessor's statement to this House on 26 March 1991.

The first strand of these new Talks began in Belfast under my predecessor's chairmanship on 9 March this year and resumed on 29 April under my chairmanship, to consider political arrangements within Northern Ireland itself.

By the beginning of July I thought it appropriate to propose that the other 2 Strands be launched. Accordingly on 6 July the second strand, involving both the Irish and British Governments and concerning relationships in the whole island of Ireland was commenced. We met initially in London, and subsequently in Belfast and Dublin. This strand has taken place under the distinguished chairmanship of Sir Ninian Stephen. To him, and to the Australian Government who permitted him to be available, we all owe an enormous debt of gratitude, particularly since in the latter stages he readily accepted an invitation to help us in our proceedings across all three strands.

On 28 July in Dublin the two Governments held the opening meeting of the third strand, concerning future relationships between them.

Throughout the Talks I have received wise and indefatigable support from the Parliamentary Secretary, my Hon Friend the Member for Richmond and Barnes. In particular he chaired a most fruitful series of Strand I Committee sessions, and has often deputised for me in the other Strands.

The present Talks, like those last year, were stipulated to be held during a specified gap between meetings of the Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Conference. Before the Talks resumed after our own general election, the two Governments announced that the next meeting of the Intergovernmental Conference would not be before the end of July. Since then the gap has been extended twice. My Right Honourable Friend the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach announced on 25 September, in a final extension, that the next meeting of the Conference would be held on 16 November. More than six months have accordingly been available for these Talks.

We have not yet succeeded in the ambitious task of securing an overall settlement, that is to say "a new beginning for relationships within Northern Ireland, within the island of Ireland, and between the peoples of these islands." Since the Talks were held on the basis that "nothing will be finally agreed in any strand until everything is agreed in the Talks as a whole and that confidentiality will be maintained", the question of a partial settlement did not arise.

Nonetheless, the Talks have seen substantive and detailed engagement on issues of the first importance.

In Strand 1 the Northern Ireland parties, together with the British Government, identified common themes and principles which should underlie any new political institutions in Northern Ireland, and examined possible structures which might reflect these.

In Strand 2, in which of course the Irish Government has also been a participant, delegations discussed fundamental aspects of relationships within the island of Ireland, and of the realities underlying them, including constitutional issues and questions of identity and allegiance. We examined the scope for enhanced co-operation within the island of Ireland, in the social, economic, and security fields among others. We considered the nature of the structures which might best serve such co-operation.

In Strand 3 the two Governments, as co-signatories of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, addressed, in liaison with the other participants, possible principles for a new and more broadly-based agreement, and possible intergovernmental arrangements.

Much has been done to identify and enlarge the common ground, and to increase understanding and respect for the participants' respective positions. The process has involved hard work and commitment from all the participants. The Talks participants have collectively reaffirmed their total abhorrence of, and unqualified opposition to, all forms of terrorism, from whatever source they may come. Nothing has taken place to alter my firm view that it was right to bring together the main constitutional parties in Northern Ireland, and the two Governments, to address, in a single process, a comprehensive agenda. It remains my judgement that, with good will

and application, a comprehensive settlement can yet be secured. Those qualities are not lacking.

Yesterday the Talks participants agreed and issued a statement, copies of which have been placed in the Library. In it they recognised that, "while at this time there is no basis to agree a settlement, they have identified and discussed most, if not all, of the elements which would comprise an eventual settlement; they have developed a clear understanding of each other's positions; and established constructive dialogue on ways in which an accommodation might be reached on some of the key issues which divide them". Madam Speaker, all recognised the great value of that dialogue. The two Governments expressed their view yesterday that further dialogue was both necessary and desirable. The four Northern Ireland parties agreed with that, and accordingly undertook to "enter into informal consultations with a view to seeking a way forward."

Madam Speaker, the whole House, although doubtless disappointed that fuller agreement has not been reached, will welcome that commitment. The objectives of the Talks process remain valid and achievable, in the expressed opinion of the Independent Chairman Sir Ninian Stephen and in my own opinion. The objectives are realistic. We have a duty therefore to build on what has been begun, however slow that process may have been, and not to give up.

We have a duty not to lose patience; not to give way to exasperation; not to recriminate.

Her Majesty's Government for its part, therefore, will steadily persevere. We shall maintain our line of approach to these objectives and we shall continue also our commitment to the resolute and just government of Northern Ireland.

Not only the people of Northern Ireland but the people of the rest of these islands - let us not forget them - deserve this of us.

The Chairman expressed the view that this should not mean that discussions would be brought permanently to an end. All concerned had set themselves ambitious objectives on entering the 3-strand process. Those objectives had not yet been achieved, despite the good will and intense effort all parties had put into the negotiations. However those objectives continued to be valid and, in the view of the Chairman, achievable.

The Talks participants noted that, while at this stage there was no basis to agree a settlement, they had identified an

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JOINT TALKS STATEMENT

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The Talks participants have agreed the following statement:

Talks delegations today held a plenary session at the end of a process that began in Strand 1 on 9 March, continued in Strand 2 from 6 July and in Strand 3, which opened on 28 July. The last four weeks of the process were spent in informal bilateral consultations among delegations and between individual delegations and the Chairman. The Talks covered fundamental aspects of the internal, North/South and East/West relationships.

The Talks were based on the statement of the then Secretary of State, Peter Brooke, of 26 March 1991. This statement recorded that all parties accepted that nothing would be finally agreed in any of the three strands of the Talks until everything was agreed in the Talks as a whole. The Talks have not resulted in a comprehensive accommodation in relation to the deep seated and long standing problems they have been addressing.

The Talks have been held, as the statement of 26 March 1991 envisaged, during a period between meetings of the Anglo-Irish Conference arranged for that purpose. Since the next meeting of the Conference has been set by the two Governments for 16 November the present Talks now come to an end.

The Chairman expressed the view that this should not mean that discussions would be brought permanently to an end. All concerned had set themselves ambitious objectives on entering the 3-strand process. Those objectives had not yet been achieved, despite the good will and intense effort all parties had put into the negotiations. However those objectives continued to be valid and, in the view of the Chairman, achievable.

The Talks participants noted that, while at this time there was no basis to agree a settlement, they had identified and

discussed most, if not all, of the elements which would comprise an eventual settlement; they had developed a clear understanding of each other's positions and established constructive dialogue on ways in which an accommodation might be reached on some of the key issues which divide them.

All parties recognise the value of the dialogue, but unsurprisingly, point to different areas of the process as being the most beneficial and identify different issues as being key obstacles. Participants have been acutely aware of the unprecedented - some might say historic - nature of the process in which they have engaged. All regret that their efforts have not been blessed with greater agreement. The two Governments are of the view that further dialogue is both necessary and desirable. The four Northern Ireland parties agree and, accordingly, will enter into informal consultations with a view to seeking a way forward.

The Strand 2 Talks participants wish to record their deep gratitude to Sir Ninian Stephen for his dedicated role in chairing this Strand of the process. They also thank the Australian Government for agreeing to make Sir Ninian available for this task and providing a senior official, Mr George Thompson, to support him in this role. The Strand 1 Talks participants also wish to extend their appreciation and thanks to Sir Patrick Mayhew MP for his chairmanship of the Strand 1 plenary meetings and to Jeremy Hanley MP for his commitment while chairing extensive Strand 1 committee sessions.

Participants also wish to put on record their gratitude to the administrative staff and all others who provided support services throughout the Talks process.

10 NOVEMBER 1992

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