

Ulster Unionist Party (UUP)

Statement
by the

Ulster Unionist Party

Launch of Strand 2 Talks

7 October 1997

The Ulster Unionist Party is participating in these talks because the best way to defend and promote the cause of the Union is not by abstention, but by fighting for our cause from within the talks process. Too often, we have seen the wishes of the greater number of people of Northern Ireland ignored and the imposition of so-called solutions, such as the Anglo-Irish agreement, forced upon them. These talks require the principle of consent to be accepted by the participants and the reality that the Union will continue for as long as that is the wish of the greater number of the people in Northern Ireland. By attending these talks the Ulster Unionist Party is determined to challenge the sincerity of Sinn Fein/IRA's declared commitment to peace and to the democratic process. We view consent and actual disarmament as a test of Sinn Fein/IRA's commitment to exclusively peaceful means as required by the Mitchell Principles. Terrorists must not be allowed to use, or threaten to use, their weaponry in order to extract concessions at the table of democracy. If Sinn Fein/IRA is truly committed to democratic and exclusively peaceful means of achieving political accommodation within Northern Ireland, it no longer needs to retain its murderous arsenal.

The Ulster Unionist Party and its supporters oppose a United Ireland because we are British. We actively espouse the United Kingdom and the Union that exists between the people of England, Scotland and Wales and Northern Ireland. We believe that the United Kingdom, by adding up those four parts, equals more than the sum of those four parts, and it reflects the interaction which has existed in the British Isles throughout history. The Union with Great Britain is a Union in the hearts and minds of the Unionist people. The feeling of Britishness is not a device or artifice which has been imposed on an unsuspecting people by successive British governments. Britishness is at the heart of the Unionist philosophy, the feeling of belonging; the feeling of sharing with our fellow-citizens in great national events; of being part of something larger than simply a specific area in the north-east corner of an island. It is a shared psychological bond; a shared emotional bond, common bonds of history and of shared adversities, shared triumphs and shared sacrifices.

Since 1177, when the Normans came to Ulster, eastern Ulster has been loyal to the crown of, firstly England, and then, Great Britain. But, our Britishness is more than loyalty to the Crown. It is a sense of communion with the rest of the peoples of the United Kingdom, built up over centuries. Northern Ireland itself has been a part of the United Kingdom from before the time when Nelson defeated the French at Trafalgar and before Wellington defeated Napoleon at Waterloo. Our ancestors shared in the project of the Empire; sacrificed themselves for King and Country on the battlefields of Europe, whilst Republicans rose in revolt in Ireland; and stood alone with Britain during the Second World War, while our southern neighbour remained aloof from the battle to preserve European civilisation. Indeed, as Winston Churchill said,

'But for the Loyalty of Northern Ireland, the light which now shines so brightly throughout the World, would have been quenched.'

In short, our sense of Britishness was forged in sweat and blood.

Yet we are told that we are not British. We are told that *'The Loyalists have a desperate identity crisis. They agonise over whether they are Ulster-Scots, Picts, English or British...yet they are not British. Loyalism is not found in Britain itself, except as an Irish export. There are no cultural links between the Loyalists and the British, no matter how much the Loyalists scream about their 'British way of life'..the Loyalists are Irish...'* This is a denial of a basic human right - the right of a community to define itself. The British people of Northern Ireland are not part of a minority within a perceived all-Ireland political unit. The United Kingdom is a multi-national and multi-ethnic community. It is no contradiction to be English and British, Scottish and British, Welsh and British, Ulster and British, or indeed Irish and British. The British in Ireland are not merely the British troops and administration; they are the greater number of people in Northern Ireland who consistently exercise their democratic right to retain their British citizenship through the ballot box. Nearly thirty years of attempts by Sinn Féin/IRA to bomb and shoot them into a United Ireland have failed to dislodge them physically or to cause them to waiver in their belief in their right to a place in the United Kingdom. It is not the British government which stands in the way of a United Ireland, it is the British people of Northern Ireland.

The failure to recognise that those who support or desire the continuance of the Union will never consent to a United Ireland, is also a fundamental and enduring mistake of Irish nationalism. Furthermore, the failure to recognise that those who support and desire the continuance of the Union, will never consent to any process or settlement which would precipitate movement towards a United Ireland, is similarly a fundamental error. From a Unionist perspective the legitimacy of Irish nationalism is not rejected in the sense that nationalists are entitled to aspire to a United Ireland, though Unionists, by definition, do not accept the validity of the nationalist argument.

What nationalists refer to as the 'Unionist veto' is simply an acceptance of reality. A vote in Westminster to expel Northern Ireland from the United Kingdom is inconceivable. But, even if it happened, it could not stop those who support the Union from being what they are, nor would it convince Unionists of the desirability of Irish Unity. The real border is not the line on a map, but the mental border between the British people of Northern Ireland and the rest of the island. Northern Ireland is not an artificial entity; on the contrary, it is the folly that the geographical land mass called Ireland somehow equates with an autonomous Irish political nation, that is the great deceit.

The future of Northern Ireland is entirely a matter for the people of Northern Ireland and must be fully respected by Sinn Fein/IRA, nationalists and the Irish Government. It is for the people of Northern Ireland to consent to any change in Northern Ireland's position within the United Kingdom and we do not consent to any such change. Any arrangements arising out of these talks must attract the consent of the overwhelming majority of the people of Northern Ireland, if indeed they are to be expected to work.

The replacement of the undemocratic Anglo-Irish Agreement with a treaty which addresses the totality of relationships within the British Isles is absolutely crucial. The UUP seeks friendly co-operative relationships within these islands on the basis of consent, mutual recognition, respect and interest. But these relationships must preserve such political independence and territorial integrity of States as upholds the fundamental principles of international law. There are important developments taking place that reflect the development of a post-nationalist Europe which do not promote the dangerous notion that every minority within a state has the right to self-determination and secession - a recipe for instability and disaster. We need only look to the Balkans for evidence of this. Rather, we look to a successful model, which emerged under the guidance of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, where the Romanian and Hungarian governments entered into an agreement which protects the linguistic, cultural and religious rights of the Hungarian minority in Romania, while at the same time declaring that neither state has any territorial claim over its neighbour and that they have no intention of ever making such a territorial claim.

Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland could have a special relationship. But, before this can be developed on a co-operative and mutually beneficial basis, Unionists need to know what is the ultimate objective and scope of the relationship. They will want firm evidence that any relationship will not be prejudicial to the continued existence of Northern Ireland, nor contrived to jeopardise its place within the United Kingdom. Crucially, Unionists are mistrustful of developing any relationship with a State that maintains a constitutional imperative to subsume them. Normalisation of relations between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland thus requires that Articles 2 and 3 of the 1937 Irish Constitution be removed.

Under the Anglo Irish Agreement the greater number of the Northern Ireland population is excluded from any role in the administration and government of Northern Ireland. Nationalists, on the other hand, through the Dublin Government, are represented at the very highest level of the decision and policy making process. The Anglo-Irish Agreement constitutes a totally unacceptable and undemocratic diminution of British sovereignty over Northern Ireland.

The Ulster Unionist Party wishes to see the divisive Anglo-Irish Agreement replaced. Any new agreement must be based on the wishes of the people of Northern Ireland - the principle of consent. It must respect the wishes of the greater number of the people of Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom and to share fully in the privileges of British citizenship. The broader agreement must look to the totality of relationships within the British Isles. The interactions on an East/West axis between Northern Ireland and Great Britain are greater in relative and absolute terms than those on a North/South axis between Northern Ireland and the Republic. An appropriate cross frontier relationship could be located within this, based on pragmatic considerations of mutual benefit and not on a political agenda. Such a relationship would not pose a threat to either jurisdiction and would, unlike the present arrangements, correspond to the real needs of all the people.

We are often told by nationalists that Unionists are dominated by a siege mentality. Yet, nationalists fail to acknowledge their contribution to the concerns of the Unionist community. Unionists have always feared that nationalists in general, have been less than honest in their declared attitude to violence in pursuit of an all-Ireland aspiration. Unionists feared that the granting of a devolved home rule parliament would ultimately lead to the establishment of an Irish Republic; this is precisely what happened. When Unionists looked at Sunningdale, and now the Framework Document, they feared, and fear, that nationalists are attempting to undermine Northern Ireland's place within the Union by subterfuge since they cannot obtain it by reason of argument or use of force. For example, Paddy Devlin, as a member of the SDLP team at the Sunningdale talks, recalled that the general approach of the SDLP at those talks,

'was to get all-Ireland institutions established which, with adequate safeguards, would produce the dynamic that could lead ultimately to an agreed single state for Ireland. That meant, of course, that SDLP representatives would spend their entire efforts on building up a set of tangible executive powers for the Council [of Ireland] which in the fullness of time would create and sustain an evolutionary process. All other issues were governed by that approach and were aimed generally at reducing loyalist resistance to the concepts of a Council of Ireland and a power-sharing Executive.'

It is dishonest to require Unionists to enter into power-sharing with other parties whose intention it is to abolish, even in the long term, the framework within which that power is shared. It is for this reason, amongst others, that we reject the Framework Document as a basis for negotiation. The whole purpose of the Document is to render the consent of the people of Northern Ireland, for a change in Northern Ireland's constitutional status, as unnecessary through a process of 'harmonisation' which is transparently and inexorably intended to lead to joint authority between Belfast and Dublin; and ultimately to a United Ireland. As a result of the initial designation of executive, harmonising and consultative functions, together with its ability to have unlimited acquisition of further powers, the proposed North/South body would be a third government in Ireland, and would very quickly become an all-Ireland administration. The Framework Document says that there would be 'an obligation on both sides to use their best endeavours to reach agreement on a common policy and to make determined efforts to overcome any obstacles in the way of that objective' - in other words, Northern Ireland would be pushed down a one-way street to a United Ireland. Furthermore, in the event that a Northern Ireland Parliament/Assembly ceased to operate, the Framework Document indicates that Her Majesty's Government and the Irish Government would ensure that the functions of the North/South body would continue to develop, regardless of the will of the greater number of the Northern Ireland people.

Additionally, too little consideration has been given to genuine East/West relations and, so far, any concentration of the East/West relationship relates primarily to the island of Ireland in order to promote an 'all-Ireland' policy. The UUP contends that the British Isles, or the British archipelago, is the natural unit. Historians increasingly recognise that the history of the component parts of the United Kingdom and the archipelago ought not to be studied in isolation. The interaction of the major cultures of the British Isles must be fully appreciated. The peoples of these islands are bound together by bonds social, economic and cultural. Much of the pressure to develop trade between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic has been shown to be politically rather than economically motivated. Cross border trade has been increasing and there is no need for exceptional action. However, economically the true dynamic market is a global market, not an introspective, insular island market. We are keen to promote trade with the Republic as with any other area. We will not however, invent bogus collaborative projects when the stimulus is political and the economic benefits are not commensurate with the cost.

To remedy this, the UUP proposes that a Council of the British Isles should be established with a flexible structure to enable various representatives within the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland to co-operate on matters of common concern. The Council's aim would be to enable all political entities to implement individually in their own jurisdictions agreed or complementary policies that are genuinely mutually beneficial in social, cultural or commercial terms but not with political or constitutional aims. This proposal represents both a considerable British and Irish dimension to any settlement. It would also offer a facility to help develop greater trust, understanding and co-operation between Unionists and Nationalists not only within Northern Ireland but also between both parts of Ireland; and among politicians within the British Isles.

We wish to make it clear that at these talks, the UUP remains four square for the Union, because the Union offers the best future for all our people whether Unionist, Nationalist or otherwise. The Union is not up for negotiation - it is this reality with which Nationalists and the Irish Government must come to terms. The Union offers all our people the best prospect of peace and fair play because the Union, links us all to a genuinely plural, liberal, democratic state capable of accommodating social, cultural and religious diversity. The Union does not exist to exalt one community over another or to sustain a religious ascendancy. The Union is not a sectarian ideal and such a union would not be worthy of preservation. The Union clearly remains our best guarantee of economic and social well being.

On May 16 1997, the Prime Minister made his first official visit outside London, to Northern Ireland. During his keynote speech in Belfast, Mr Blair underlined his commitment to Northern Ireland and the consent principle stating ,

'I am committed to Northern Ireland. I am committed to the principle of consent. Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom, alongside England, Scotland and Wales. The Union binds the four parts of the United Kingdom together. I believe in the United Kingdom. I value the Union.'

He later stated in a *Newsletter* article of September 13 1997, in a clear reference to Strand Two talks that he wishes to see in a settlement,

'..mutually beneficial agreed North-South arrangements in the context of a broader based agreement addressing the totality of relationships within these islands.'

Our aim is to fashion a settlement firmly within the Union. Based on the fundamental principle of consent, we want to see a settlement, not a temporary transitional arrangement, which recognises Northern Ireland's position as part of the United Kingdom, and addresses sensible, agreed, and mutually beneficial arrangements. The fundamental issue of the democratic rights of the people of Northern Ireland and their right to determine their destiny, is not an issue for negotiation or compromise.

Ends.