

LAUNCH OF STRAND I

OPENING STATEMENT BY MR MURPHY

1. Ladies and Gentleman, it is a very great pleasure for me to launch our discussions in the three strands. A great many people have worked very hard to bring this day about and I would like to express my personal thanks to the Independent Chairmen and to all the parties for their commitment to this process.

2. What is important now is that we set our eyes firmly on the future. We have the chance to usher in a new era for Northern Ireland. We must all turn our efforts towards devising the comprehensive settlement that would lay the foundation for a better, more stable and more harmonious future for Northern Ireland. This is a golden opportunity to modernise relationships within Northern Ireland and more widely, and to build a brighter future for Northern Ireland for the new century.

Commitment to democracy

3. All of the parties around the table today are here because they have obtained a mandate from the people in last year's elections and have committed themselves exclusively to peaceful methods and the democratic process. Those are the corner-stones on which this process has been built. This underlines the reality that, in a democracy, the only way to address and seek to resolve conflict is through debate and negotiation leading to agreement. This process can go ahead on no other basis. If people are not committed to democratic principles they have no place in these negotiations. The future for Northern Ireland must be determined by peaceful negotiation alone.

The ceasefire; inclusive negotiations

4. These talks are different from other talks that have taken place in modern times. For the first time we are meeting while IRA and loyalist ceasefires are in place. I welcome those ceasefires and look to them to continue. What is also different is that these negotiations can now embrace the broadest spectrum of opinion since Northern Ireland came into being. We therefore have an unparalleled opportunity to build an agreement which is drawn from, and rooted in, all strands of political opinion. The talks would have the greatest impact if they were to involve every party with a mandate to participate. I therefore hope that those parties who have currently withdrawn from the process will rejoin it as soon as possible. It could only be of benefit to the process as a whole to have every voice heard around the table.

5. For the first time also we are considering new arrangements for Northern Ireland at a time when plans are in hand for devolution to Scotland and Wales. This Government believes in the principle of bringing power closer to ordinary people. We want to see that happening in Northern Ireland just as much as elsewhere.

The three-stranded approach

6. While some aspects of these talks are new the underlying approach is familiar to us all. Our aim is to achieve a new beginning for relationships within Northern Ireland, within the island of Ireland and between the peoples of these islands, and to agree new institutions and structures to take account of the totality of relationships. It is common ground that any agreement, if it is to command widespread support, will need to give adequate expression to the totality of all three relationships. The talks have been structured in such a way as to give us the best change to tackle all the issues that must be resolved if we are to reach a comprehensive, negotiated settlement. Thus it is open to all the relevant parties to be involved; the talks will take account of all the relevant relationships; they can cover all the issues of concern to all the participants; and have no limitations as to the outcome, beyond the need for agreement.

The Government's role

7. The Government's role in these negotiations is to encourage and facilitate agreement. We will use our chairmanship of Strand I specifically with those aims in mind. Strand I does not, of course, involve the Irish Government but, as envisaged in the Rules of Procedure, I will keep them informed and report to them the status of our negotiations, as determined by us all.

8. We are not wedded to any particular outcome but will support any agreement which emerges by sufficient consensus and would be likely to command widespread support in the community at large. Such an agreement is likely to include support for new political arrangements in Northern Ireland, new arrangements for co-operation with the Republic, a new and more broadly based Anglo-Irish Agreement, and a balanced

consensus on the constitutional issues. Any agreement is also likely to contain strong underpinning for the rights and cultures of both traditions.

The substance of Strand I

9. Our task in Strand I is to address and seek to reach agreement on relationships and arrangements within Northern Ireland, including the relationship between any new institutions here and the Westminster Parliament. A detailed programme of work has yet to be drawn up but it might be helpful if I mention some of the key issues we will have to consider. These are likely to include -

- the principles and requirements that should underpin any new relationships
- constitutional issues
- and the nature, form and extent of new arrangements, including the role of elected institutions.

10. Any discussion of elected institutions would need to examine a range of issues including their constitution, the method of election, their role and responsibilities, their relationship with the executive, accountability, checks and balances against abuse, finance, and the relationship with the Westminster Parliament, the European Union and political institutions in the Republic of Ireland, perhaps also with the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly.

Justice, rights and confidence issues

11. In our discussions in this Strand we will also need to consider how any emerging proposals would relate to developments in the other two strands. We will want to consider in depth a range of justice issues, human rights and safeguards.

12. Another area where we can expect searching debate is the future role of any elected institutions in policing, prisons and security matters. These are highly important issues for both sides of the community. I would not expect other than that these issues will be vigorously debated, but in doing so we should all keep clearly in mind that our purpose in these negotiations is to find a way of reconciling different points of view, of finding common ground which would be acceptable across the community, and which would draw the sting from these issues for future generations.

13. As some around this table will know, a substantial measure of contingent agreement was reached on Strand I issues during the 1992 talks. The previous government took direct account of what was said in those talks when it published the "Framework for Accountable Government" in 1995. The Government made clear then, as I do now, that the proposals in that document represent one possible model for relationships within Northern Ireland; from our point of view we would be prepared to consider seriously any other proposals which carried the necessary support from the parties.

Principles

14. Among the significant issues we shall need to consider in Strand I are the principles that should underpin any settlement. One of the most important of those - perhaps the most important - is the principle of consent. The two governments have recently made it clear that they regard this as a guiding principle for them in the negotiations. Our position remains as set out in the Downing Street Declaration. The Prime Minister repeated it, on the record, in his Newsletter article on 13 September.

15. It is thus the firm position of the Government that Northern Ireland will remain within the United Kingdom so long as that remains the will of a majority. The corollary of that is that if a majority clearly wished for and formally consented to Irish unity, we would support that also.

16. As for the negotiations, we are clear that any settlement that might emerge must be supported by both unionists and nationalists. It must carry the agreement of parties representing majorities of both the communities. This is vital if the settlement is to be sustainable and of lasting benefit. Any outcome from the talks would also need to be approved in a referendum in Northern Ireland before being put to Parliament. The so-called "triple lock" therefore remains firmly in place.

17. I am sure that, as our discussions move forward, all the parties will want to contribute fully to the negotiations. For our part, if it would be helpful, we stand ready to table briefing or other discussion papers to provide background on the issues under consideration. These papers might cover such issues as the structures of Government in Northern Ireland, the public expenditure system and public appointment procedures. In general, we stand ready to provide whatever papers would be helpful.

18. In conclusion, I look forward to the negotiations that lie ahead. We have a great opportunity to modernise the structures of Government in Northern Ireland and to create arrangements which all parts of the community can support and which would bring government closer to the people. I hope we will all do everything in our power to ensure that these important aims are realised.