

These are the points I wanted to make to you which I have put in writing so there can be no misunderstanding. After our meeting I will be giving copies of this note to the press and others.

1. As Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, my duty is to act in the interests of all the people living in Northern Ireland. That means, in the main, working to establish peace and political stability and to maximise the social and economic opportunities for all the people of Northern Ireland.
2. Recent acts of sectarian violence have once again left the people of Northern Ireland very fearful for the future. We will continue to take whatever steps are necessary to combat the threat of terrorism wherever it comes from.
3. But the long term defeat of terrorism requires more than a commitment to support the efforts of the security forces. It requires a proper political settlement that is agreed between political representatives and widely supported on both sides of the community.
4. Such a political settlement must address the issues and relationships which are of concern to both sides of the community. Unionists, for example, want to see changes to the Irish Constitution and a replacement for the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Nationalists want a new relationship between unionism and nationalism within the island of Ireland and North/South arrangements which would help to accommodate the Irish nationalist identity of the minority community in Northern Ireland.
5. The talks process is designed to allow these and all other issues of concern to any participant can be discussed and resolved. It gives all sides an opportunity to achieve the goals which are of great importance to them without abandoning the values and principles they hold dear.
6. No participant's fundamental interests are threatened. Any agreement must have the support of parties representing majorities on both sides of the community. Then any agreement will need to be endorsed by a majority of the people of Northern Ireland in a referendum before the legislation necessary to implement it could be put to Parliament.
7. Both the British and Irish Governments have said that consent will be a guiding principle for them in the negotiations, and that there is no predetermined outcome. The parties in the talks have declared their support for this. There is no question of Northern Ireland ceasing to be part of the United Kingdom without the consent of a majority of the people who live there.
8. Participation in the negotiations is of course open to all those parties with an electoral mandate which have demonstrated their commitment to exclusively democratic methods. Participation also requires total and absolute commitment to the Mitchell principles of democracy and non-violence.

9. Like you I have been frustrated at the slow progress in the talks. But we have been discussing matters of substance since the beginning of October and there were encouraging signs before Christmas that the parties were prepared to move towards an agreement on the key issues before us.

10. We take the view that the talks need to become focused on what the broad parameters of any agreement would be. Our efforts to get that agreed with the participants will be stepped up when the talks come back next week, and we want to see early progress made.

11. Meanwhile, the Government is committed to building confidence throughout the community in Northern Ireland. It will govern with fairness, but not favours to either side of the community.

12. No doubt, the clearest boost to confidence will come through agreement in the talks process. But, on the way, other issues of confidence to both sides are being discussed in two Sub Committees of the talks. We recognise that prisoner issues are important to parties on both sides. They too need to be resolved, alongside progress on all the other issues, to the satisfaction of the participants in the process.

13. We have a responsibility to maintain community confidence in the criminal justice system and in the political process. We are prepared, in the Liaison Sub Committee on confidence building measures, to discuss parties' concerns and to work on an account of what would happen in respect of prisoner releases in the context of a peaceful and lasting settlement being agreed. But, let me be clear, there will be no significant changes to release arrangements in any other context or for prisoners associated with a paramilitary organisation actively engaged in terrorist activity.

14. The people of Northern Ireland want and deserve a lasting peace won through negotiation and agreement by their political representatives. The Prime Minister, Tony Blair, and I are committed to that goal and will do all we can to help achieve it. I call upon all others who can influence this process in any way to do the same.