

Ulster Unionist Party (UUP)

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Statement by Dermot Nesbitt following meeting of Sub-committee on 15th December 1997 regarding confidence building measures.

Confidence building, with respect to economic issues, was considered. However, the UK Government had nothing to say as regards the UUP's requests. The majority in Northern Ireland continue to face criticism that discrimination needs to be combated - the UUP believes that this assertion should be refuted by government. If this assertion was refuted it would give confidence to the whole community that the NI economy is working fairly.

The UK Government's response was that it was still thinking about the matter. We have pressed the government for many months to address this issue. It is abundantly clear that the government has NO commitment to confidence building for the Unionist community. After a long three hour meeting I said to the UK Government that its response was pathetic.

More generally, if this meeting is an indication of the Government's overall long-term attitude to the talks process, then no settlement will be reached. If both the UK and Irish Governments and nationalism believe that they can sit tight waiting for Unionism to concede, they are mistaken.

Mr Ahern stated this week in Washington that "most of the key issues have been well debated". I state clearly, if the overall debate that we had in the sub-committee is an indication of the UK and Irish Governments' thinking, then Mr Ahern is clearly wrong. We have a long way to go.

We will not be prepared, over the next three months, to be 'shoe-horned' into a quick acceptance of an outcome to the talks that is detrimental to the unionist position. I repeat again, we wish to make progress; we wish all to be working together in government in Northern Ireland; and we wish to co-operate fully with the Irish government on matters of common interest, along with other regions of the UK.

However, it will never be possible to find a widely acceptable solution to the problems of our divided society without a basis of agreed principles. These principles will have to be derived from accepted practice laid down by the international community. Both the UK and Irish governments cannot avoid their responsibility in this regard. Until these principles are widely agreed it is naive to expect much progress from the political talks.

(Submission to Confidence Building Committee by UUP follows - 1 page)

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