

Northern Ireland (Political Talks)

Mr. Speaker: Before the Secretary of State starts, may I ask hon. Members who are not remaining for this important statement to leave quietly and without conversation?

3.30 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. Peter Brooke): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I will make a statement about political development in Northern Ireland.

I am pleased to be able to inform the House that, following extensive discussions with the main constitutional parties in Northern Ireland—the Alliance party of Northern Ireland, the Social Democratic and Labour party, the Ulster Democratic Unionist party and the Ulster Unionist party—and with the Irish Government, a basis for formal political talks now exists. I frankly acknowledge to the House that this would not have been possible without the good will and determination of the Northern Ireland parties and the helpful and constructive approach taken by the Irish Government. The stated positions of all these parties are well known. Her Majesty's Government reaffirms their position that Northern Ireland's present status as a part of the United Kingdom will not change without the consent of a majority of its people.

The endeavour on which we have all agreed to embark is an ambitious one. We are setting out to achieve a new beginning for relationships within Northern Ireland, within the island of Ireland and between the peoples of these islands. While a successful outcome cannot be guaranteed in advance, I am confident that all the potential participants are committed to a forward-looking and constructive approach. For their part, the two signatories of the Anglo-Irish Agreement—the British and Irish Governments—have made it clear that they would be prepared to consider a new and more broadly based agreement or structure if such an agreement can be arrived at through direct discussion and negotiation between all the parties concerned.

To allow an opportunity for such a wider political dialogue, the two Governments have agreed not to hold a meeting of the Anglo-Irish Conference between two pre-specified dates. All the parties concerned will make use of this interval for intensive discussions to seek the new and more broadly based agreement which I have just described.

As the conference will not be meeting between the specified dates the Secretariat at Maryfield will accordingly not be required for that period to discharge its normal role of servicing conference meetings provided for in article 3 of the Agreement.

It is accepted that discussions must focus on three main relationships: those within Northern Ireland, including the relationship between any new institutions there and the Westminster Parliament; among the people of the island of Ireland; and between the two Governments. It is common ground between all the parties that hope of achieving a new and more broadly based agreement rests on finding a way to give adequate expression to the totality of the relationships I have mentioned.

Talks will accordingly take place in three strands corresponding respectively to the three relationships.

Some arrangements will be needed for liaison between the different strands of these complex discussions. All the Northern Ireland parties will participate actively and directly in the north-south discussions. The Unionist parties have made it clear that they wish their participation in those talks to be formally associated with my presence and that they will regard themselves as members of the United Kingdom team. It is accepted by all those involved that, to make full use of the interval between meetings of the conference to achieve an overall agreement satisfactory to all, it will be necessary to have launched all three sets of discussions within weeks of each other.

A first step towards getting related discussions under way in all three strands will be the opening, as soon as possible, of substantive talks between the parties in Northern Ireland under my chairmanship. These will commence with a round of bilateral meetings before moving on, as soon as possible, into plenary sessions. It has been agreed by all the participants that before long, when, after consultation, I judge that an appropriate point has been reached, I will propose formally that the other two strands should be launched. My judgment as to timing will be governed by the fact that all involved have agreed that the three sets of discussions will be under way within weeks of each other.

The internal talks, like the talks in the other strands, will follow a demanding and intensive schedule. In order to ensure a full airing of the issues, it will be open to each of the parties to raise any aspect of these relationships, including constitutional issues, or any other matter which it considers relevant. All concerned have assured me that they will participate in good faith and will make every effort to achieve progress.

It is accepted by all the parties 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 thereunto. However, in the final analysis, the outcome will need to be acceptable to the people.

Mr. Kevin McNamara (Kingston upon Hull, North): In thanking the right hon. Gentleman for his statement, may I take the opportunity to congratulate him on his determination and tenacity, which have been vital in securing the agreement that he has just announced? We are also grateful for the imagination and flexibility displayed by the political parties in Northern Ireland and by the Irish Government. We hope very much that those qualities will still be on display throughout the substantive negotiations which are about to begin.

Today's statement is only the beginning of a process that we all desire will lead to an agreement that will be acceptable throughout the island of Ireland. We are at an historic moment. There is now a window of opportunity, when possibilities for a political settlement are open in a way that has not been possible for decades. We know that all the participants recognise their responsibility because they would not otherwise have come so far. They carry on their shoulders the hopes and wishes of all sections of the people of Ireland, north and south, and of this island. The people will not lightly forgive their elected representatives if, over the next few weeks, they do not live up to the spirit and letter of the statement that has been agreed today. We have confidence that they will.

The Opposition fully support the participants in their endeavours to bring about a lasting agreement which will resolve the dissensions between Unionists and nationalists.