

PLENARY: 5 MARCH

STATEMENT BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE

We were forced to acknowledge last week that, despite the intensive efforts by you, Mr Chairman, and your colleagues and staff, there was little prospect of any measure of agreement in these negotiations in advance of the forthcoming elections. It would be quite wrong to remain here in those circumstances; we would do the process no good, and risk damage to its credibility outside. What is important now is to ensure that it can return after the elections with the best prospects for agreement, and that objective is, I believe, best served by the proposals you have made.

2. Everyone else around the table, even Mr O hUiginn, may very well be back here after the election. I myself shall not. I hope I will have my colleagues' indulgence to make a few remarks by way of closing my involvement in this process.

Achievements

3. The achievements of the process, to which you have alluded, should not be under-rated. It was, I believe, a significant achievement to have got here in the first place; it took some years; it required at times vision and courage amongst participants to agree the basis on which we arrived - and those are qualities that will be needed in no small quantity if we are ultimately to succeed. You have mentioned the things we have done: the agreements on rules of procedure, and on the agenda for this Opening Plenary. There has also been a wide measure of agreement on the substance of that agenda, and important elements of potential convergence that have been identified on the decommissioning question.

4. The informal achievements should not be neglected either. We have, as you say, come to know one another's views - often on the issues of substance that will have to be confronted in the future; and we have found new methods of working. These have so far not led to any breakthrough; but I hope that one day they will be seen to have been important groundwork for a comprehensive agreement.

The Disappointments

5. I understand, nevertheless, and share the widespread disappointment that we have not been able to show greater results from the opportunity that the talks offer, and that we have not been able to address directly or at all the substantive political issues in the three strands. I believe that disappointment is shared in all parts of the community; high hopes were raised by these negotiations, and for so long as they fail to produce progress to a better future, there will be growing public unease, heartache even, for the future of Northern Ireland.

6. For our own part, we have tried our best to find ways forward. It is clear, if anyone doubted it, that it is not in our gift to pressurise others to come along with us. We can only seek to bridge gaps, and if bridging materials are swept away then stronger materials must be designed, brought up and installed.

Decommissioning

7. What has concerned us most has been the important and difficult issue of decommissioning. The desire for confidence that the negotiations will not be conducted with any sort of threat of return to violence intended to hang over them is entirely proper and we share it. But for our part, we believe, having looked long at the question, that in truth the only way forward here is to follow the approach commended by you, Mr Chairman, and your colleagues, in the report of the International Body, that some decommissioning should take place during the negotiations. We have ourselves made

strenuous efforts to achieve agreement on this basis, putting forward a number of our own proposals. At the same time we have placed legislation on the statute book to provide a legal scheme for decommissioning, as have the Irish Government.

8. It would be difficult enough to reach agreement on this issue without the added pressure of an imminent election. Much of the ground has been covered - in our written and oral presentations, in discussion of each other's positions, in bilateral and multilateral meetings of various sorts and in discussions with yourself and your fellow Chairmen. Several areas of potential convergence have been identified. Although there is not currently a sufficient basis of agreement to reach a successful determination on the issue of decommissioning it does in my judgement remain possible that an agreement will be reached after the election period.

The Right Process

9. Despite our frustration at not having got further, I am confident that the process we have is fundamentally right. It has, I believe, all the features necessary to be the vehicle for a settlement. It is capable of bringing together both Governments and all the main political interests in Northern Ireland that are committed to pursuing their objectives by democratic and non-violent means. It is capable of addressing all the issues that need to be resolved if there is to be a comprehensive political settlement which could underpin lasting peace. It takes account of all the relevant relationships within Northern Ireland, and beyond. It compromises no one's vital interests.

10. All the participants have objectives which can only be secured through a political negotiation with a broad agenda, capable of addressing future arrangements for the government of Northern Ireland, the future relationship between the two parts of Ireland and the future relationship between the two Governments. Everyone could gain from negotiations which produced agreement on new and widely acceptable political institutions in Northern Ireland, a new

and positive relationship between the two parts of Ireland, a shared understanding on constitutional matters and a new and more broadly based Agreement.

11. There are misconceptions that are still advanced, even by some here, about the process. It is suggested that the talks somehow, of their nature, put the Union in danger. That is quite simply wrong. Anything may be discussed in the talks. But the principle of consent is now endorsed by all significant political parties in the United Kingdom and Ireland, with the sole exception of Sinn Féin. In any event, the sufficient consensus rule, which requires the support of parties representing majorities in each main part of the community, guarantees that no one sided settlement is going to be arrived at. And after that, there is the clear undertaking that the proposals will be submitted to a referendum in Northern Ireland, and then to Parliament. Talk of the Union somehow being undermined by the process itself is manifestly groundless.

12. Some also have claimed that the process has been designed to appease Sinn Féin. That, too, is wrong. We make no apology for favouring an inclusive process; it represents the best chance of securing a comprehensive, durable and widely acceptable political settlement. Our position is clear. This process is open to Sinn Fein on democratic terms that are clearly laid out, but there is no question of appeasement. Equally it is open to all of us who are here to move forward without them if Sinn Fein choose to remain outside. That, we believe, is entirely right in principle. It threatens no-one's legitimate interests.

The Need for Progress

13. So I believe the Talks framework is one in which progress can be made, and I believe it is extremely important that it is made: that, at an early point after the elections, you will be able to move forward into substantive negotiations. That, I believe, is what the people of Northern Ireland generally hope to see in these talks,

which offer the prospect of a better way of life for Northern Ireland. If, however, dialogue and constitutional means are shown not to have delivered results, then the prospects are much worse.

14. For my part I remain rationally and firmly hopeful.

Thanks

15. Much hard work has been done in these negotiations, and there are many to thank for the progress that we have made, and for laying the basis for more in the future. Most obviously, Mr Chairman, the excellence of the efforts of yourself and your colleagues is I believe very widely appreciated; and you have our warm gratitude and respect for all you have done. That gratitude we express to yourselves, to your diligent and talented staffs, and to your Governments for agreeing to your serving in this unique and arduous capacity.

16. We are all, I believe, grateful, to those in the Talks Administration Unit who have so competently organised the facilities here; and indeed to our own advisers.

17. So I conclude these comments, Mr Chairman, with very profound thanks to all those involved, and with good wishes for rapid progress when the talks resume.