

STRAND II

OPENING STATEMENT BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE

Purpose

1. Mr Chairman, I very much welcome the launch of Strand II today, alongside the launch of the other two strands. The fact that we have got to this point is a tribute to the will and determination of the parties and to the support and encouragement from their constituents. I have no doubt at all that the overwhelming majority want to see these talks take place and to succeed.

2. But the fact that we have got to this point is also due, in no small measure, to the strength of your own commitment to the process, matched by that of General de Chastelain and Prime Minister Holkeri. Your continued presence here is, if I may say so, a vote of confidence in the process and a vote of confidence in Northern Ireland. I hope we will repay the confidence you are showing in us all.

3. It is no exaggeration to say that these talks could turn out to be a defining moment for Northern Ireland. We have it in our grasp to lay the foundations for a peaceful and harmonious future for the people of Northern Ireland and for their wider relationships with Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland. The challenge is huge but the prize immeasurable. I hope we will all rise to the challenge; I am sure that is what the people want. It will require courage, good will and compromise - qualities that will make heavy demands on us all - but the demands will be fully justified if we reach our ultimate goal.

Purpose of Strand II

4. Mr Chairman, our purpose in this strand is to address and seek to reach agreement on relationships and arrangements within the island of Ireland. The work we have to undertake in this strand will be fundamental to the achievement of an agreement as a whole. There is no disguising the fact that in this strand we will be confronting some of the most contentious issues we will face in the entire negotiation. This question, of the relationships within the island of Ireland, is of immense importance to both parts of the community in Northern Ireland and carries a very high political charge. It is an area where the different aspirations of those who support Northern Ireland's place within the Union and those who aspire to a United Ireland come hard up against each other. The down side of this, in terms of the negotiations, is that this Strand deals with issues which could be amongst the most difficult to resolve. The positive side is that if we are able to produce proposals which carried wide support amongst the parties this could be the key which unlocks the process as a whole.

HMG's role and interest in Strand II

5. With this in mind, I look forward to a vigorous and intensive discussion of the issues. The Government's role in this Strand, as in the negotiations as a whole, is to encourage, facilitate and enable the achievement of a comprehensive agreement based on full respect for the rights and identities of both traditions. This reflects our position in the Joint Declaration. We are not committed to any single outcome and will support any conclusions, achieved by sufficient consensus, that emerge from the discussions and would be likely to command widespread support in the community. Part of my function in this strand will be to ensure that whatever proposals are put forward fully accord with the Government's international obligations.

Constitutional issues

6. It is a feature of the three Stranded process that whatever is proposed or agreed in one strand has the potential to affect what is advanced in another. One of the strengths of the three stranded process is that it permits trade-offs both within and between strands and ensures that individual issues that are relevant to more than one relationship can be addressed in the appropriate ways.

7. This is the case with constitutional issues. Proposals may be put forward in Strand II which, intrinsically, would carry constitutional implications. Above and beyond that, the constitutional issues that are debated and examined in Strands I and III will also have a bearing on the participants' attitudes to Strand II. This being so we can anticipate a wide ranging debate on constitutional matters in this strand. There is provision for this in the outline agenda. If we are to achieve the overall outcome that we all desire, then a crucial part of that will be an agreed view between the participants on the constitutional issues. These issues, which are of major importance to both unionists and nationalists, run into Strand III also; we stand ready to discuss them with the parties in either Strand.

8. Similarly we can expect a wide-ranging discussion of human rights. This matter is of particular interest in Strand I but is also relevant to wider relationships within the island of Ireland.

Strand II: Detail

9. As with the other strands, we shall need to devise a workplan for this particular strand, drawing on the agenda dating from 15 October last year. There already exist, of course, many links, contacts and exchanges at all levels between Northern Ireland and the Republic. These work for

the benefit and enrichment of people in both jurisdictions. Our discussions in this strand, however, will give us the chance to consider in depth the character of the relationship in future.

10. Among the issues that I expect we will need to consider are the principles and requirements that should underpin the relationship, constitutional issues, and the nature, form and extent of the future relationship, including possible new institutional arrangements. The issue of possible institutional arrangements gives rise to questions about their role and composition, the method of establishment, the source of authority, lines of accountability, the extent of their responsibilities, methods of operation, sources of finance, and wider relationships affecting Northern Ireland, the Irish Government and Parliament, the British Government and Parliament, the European Union, and between the two Governments.

11. Previous British and Irish Governments have, of course, set out their shared ideas on one possible model for the North/South relationship, as part of an overall agreement. This is to be found in "A New Framework for Agreement", published in 1995. We regard that model as a useful basis for discussion which we commend. Of course this represents only one possible way of balancing the different interests and, if alternative proposals emerged in the negotiations, which would attract sufficient consensus and would command widespread support in the community, I should be ready to support them

12. To conclude, as we begin to focus on the issues in this strand I think we might usefully remind ourselves of the commitments which we all entered into when we accepted the rules of procedure. Together we have undertaken to negotiate in good faith, seriously address all aspects of the agreed agenda, and make every effort to reach a comprehensive agreement. These are challenging goals; we have set our sights high.

Having done so, I hope we will all do everything we can to meet these challenging objectives in the months ahead. It is in our own interests, each and every one of us, that we should. All of us, and all the people we represent, stand only to gain.