Ulster Democratic Party

Strand Two Opening Statement 7th October 1997

Delivered by John White, lead negotiator in Strand Two

Mr. Chairman,

In October 1994 the loyalist cease-fire was called in expectation of imminent Talks on the future of Northern Ireland. Today, almost three years on, the time for substantial negotiations has finally come. And this is indeed a historic opportunity to reach a lasting and stable settlement.

The three strands of these negotiations aim at exploring the totality of relations within the British Isles. We, as the elected representatives of the people, have been entrusted with the great responsibility to heal the deep divisions between nationalists and unionists, to give the people a voice, and to remove the ambiguous and often contradictory governmental decision-making on Northern Ireland, including the Province's relations with the rest of the United Kingdom, as well as relations with the Irish Republic.

The relationships within Northern Ireland are at the core of these negotiations. But inter-communal tension has over the past been subjected to Irish interference, Westminster impositions, and Anglo-Irish tensions. The Troubles did not emerge within a vacuum, but were in many ways the product of inconsistent, irresponsible, and negligent British and Irish state strategies. Co-operation between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic, which should have been logical and natural, has suffered as a consequence.

The relationship within the island of Ireland has not always been the most cordial or co-operative one. It has been marred by the insecurities and uncertainties of the constitutional status of Northern Ireland. Competing claims over territory and

jurisdiction have created the fundamental problems of identity and allegiance which over the past years have often been expressed through violence.

It would be foolish to believe that the issues of identity and allegiance can be resolved to everyone's satisfaction at this point or even within the current negotiations. What can, however, be settled, once and for all, and unequivocally, is the perceived constitutional uncertainty which has been at the root of hostilities within Northern Ireland and the problematic relationship between the North and the South.

The outbreak of the Troubles in 1969 was a consequence of the disputed status of Northern Ireland. While both British and Irish representatives had agreed that Northern Ireland would remain British in the 1920 Government of Ireland Act and the 1925 boundary settlement, not everyone accepted this. The 1937 rewriting of the Irish constitution made this clear when under Eamon de Valera's personal supervision Ireland reneged on previously negotiated state boundaries and laid claim to Northern Ireland in articles two and three. This unilateral and irredentist move has since been used as a justification to forcibly unify Northern Ireland with the Republic.

The violent means in pursuit of republican aspirations have created a long list of casualties - among them the relationships between the North and the South. Consequently, many common interests have not been explored to their fullest. In an era in which economic boundaries have been disappearing and economic interests have been integrated in a wider European context, the disharmony in cross-border co-operation has been most regrettable. All the people in the island of Ireland have suffered as a result.

We welcome the opportunity to change this situation within the context of these negotiations. Co-operation between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic on issues of agriculture, economic development, infrastructure, public transportation, tourism, and security is not only logical but highly desirable. In fact, not only the relationship within the island of Ireland needs to be reconsidered, but the relationship within the

British Isles as a whole should be improved.

The Irish Republic and the United Kingdom share a common language, common industrial and technical standards, a similar legal system, and overlapping professional institutions. Accordingly, it makes much more sense to review the relationships within the island of Ireland in the broader context of the British Isles and even the European Union. Shipping, fishing, the environment, migration, tourism, agriculture, and drugs, for example, are not just issues that apply purely to Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. Successful policies also require co-ordination and co-operation with England, Scotland and Wales.

Indeed, the Ulster Democratic Party has argued repeatedly for the establishment of a Council of British Isles as a means for pursuing better relations and mutually beneficial co-operation across these islands. Obviously we believe that the more comprehensive approach would be more successful, but no matter whether it is the relationships within the British Isles or within the island of Ireland that need to be considered for improvement, an environment of trust must first be created in order for such co-operation to work.

The preliminary step for such a positive environment is clarity and transparency. So let's be clear:

Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom - and only the United Kingdom.

Irish claims to territory and jurisdiction as embodied in articles two and three are invalid and unlawful and thus should be rescinded.

The Anglo-Irish Agreement must be superseded for the relationships within the island of Ireland to move onto a meaningful level.

The focus of the Frameworks Document on North-South relations is

inadequate and seriously flawed.

There is no consent for deeper integration leading to an all-Irish economy and possibly a political con-federation.

And, last but not least, any change in Northern Ireland's constitutional status can only be arrived at with the consent of the people of this Province. And the people of Northern Ireland wish to remain British.

Therefore, only within the existing constitutional structure can a solid foundation for cross-border co-operation be built.

As long as there are competing British-Irish claims to Northern Ireland, the necessary environment for full co-operation will not exist. Articles two and three should therefore be abolished as soon as possible in order to create conditions conducive to co-operation. The withdrawal of the Irish claim to Northern Ireland would not only be a much needed confidence building measure, but is essential for the people of Northern Ireland's right to self-determination. Only in absence of this claim will they have the space to decide freely in these negotiations whether they wish to remain part of the United Kingdom, become part of a united Ireland, or any other arrangement.

The Irish government like the British government has portrayed itself as host and facilitator in this political process. Yet, when the British government announced that it does not have any selfish, strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland, the Irish government did not follow suit. Now the time has come for the Republic of Ireland to also claim that it has no selfish, strategic or economic interest in the North - and drop articles two and three.

The relationship between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic can only improve through such a move. The cliché of "good fences make good neighbours" springs to mind. Clarity on the constitutional issue and the border will help resolve the issues

of identity and allegiance over time. Cross-border co-operation can be developed within the given structures and will no doubt increase with wider European economic integration. We welcome such integration whole-heartedly.