

Outline of Opening Remarks by Irish Government Delegation

Chairman.

I should like to begin by thanking you, Sir Ninian, for coming here today to preside over our meeting. I should also like to thank the Australian Government for releasing you to take on this task and for also making Mr. Thompson available. We look forward to working under your Chairmanship.

This, as we see it, is a practical meeting to deal with practical issues and not an occasion for rhetoric. Nevertheless as we come to the table it is hard not to be conscious of what this process is about. We are seeking to work together around this table to find a way between all of us to lift the heavy burden of history which weighs on all of us in these islands. What we seek to do is to use the goodwill which does exist so abundantly between the peoples of both islands to help to resolve the remaining unresolved problems of our common history. Certainly the mandate from our Government with which we come here today is to approach the process to which we have all committed ourselves in a spirit of goodwill and in a genuine effort to reach agreement.

How do we see the present meeting? In my view it should be a practical meeting. Last year, after long negotiations, we all agreed on a document of 26 March, 1991 setting a framework within which we would work. That document made it clear that there are three main relationships which must be addressed and which must find adequate expression if a real and genuine settlement is to be reached. That point is a fundamental point; and it was recognised in the structure set for the talks, which were to take place in three strands.

I will cite, if I may, some key points from that document of 26 March, 1991 which are of particular relevance to our discussion today. The two Governments which had signed the Anglo Irish Agreement made it clear that they would be "prepared to consider a new and more broadly based agreement or structure if such an arrangement can be arrived

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at through direct discussion and negotiation between all the parties concerned".

Another point of particular importance was the agreement that "it would be necessary to have launched all three sets of discussions within weeks of each other." We all agreed also that, "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 also agreed "to participate in good faith" : and it was accepted by all the parties that "nothing would be finally agreed in any strand until everything is agreed in the talks as a whole."



Taking account of these guidelines agreed on 26 March, 1991 we feel that our approach today to this meeting, which is in preparation for Strand Two, should be a practical and sensible one. It should be directed to smoothing the path to enable Strand Two, and in due course Strand Three, to get under way, bearing in mind that we are all agreed that "all three sets of discussions should be underway within weeks of each other."

More particularly in our work here today, it seems to me right to work towards an agenda which would be broad enough in its structure to allow all issues which any party wishes to raise to be covered. We feel that this could best be done by working from the general to the particular.

The agenda should therefore allow for general statements to be made at the outset. All of you here have been participating in intensive discussions in Strand One. We were not participants in those talks. We are now moving towards Strand Two where the Irish Government will be involved. It seems to me right, therefore, in preparing an agenda for that Strand to allow scope for general statements to be made at the outset which will be directed to the nature of the problem. I am thinking not just of what the Irish Government would wish to say but of what other parties around the table might wish to say directly to the Irish Government.

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In approaching this meeting, we had thought it better not to put forward a specific draft agenda at this stage but rather to suggest first to others around the table the broad lines of an approach to the agenda on which I think we could all agree. This approach would first allow for statements of the problem and the issues of identity and allegiance as they are seen by the various parties. The agenda could then move to the requirements to be met if that problem is to be addressed. It could then go on to consider structures which could meet those requirements. Then there would be a need for views on the relationship of those structures to existing structures; and finally there would then be need to discuss the consequential measures and prepare the way for Strand Three discussions.

The advantage of this approach is that it would be possible, within a very general framework, to accommodate specific issues which any party wish to raise. We should bear in mind that the statement of 26 March makes it clear that "it is open to each of the parties to raise any aspect of these relationships including constitutional issues or any other matter which it considers relevant." So it will always remain open to any party to raise any matter. If it seemed desirable, in due course, we could put forward a specific draft which would give expression to this approach. But for the moment I think it might be preferable not to focus on any particular wording or formula but to try to see if we could all agree on the general approach I have outlined.

The word "Strand" to me suggests intertwining. All three strands are inter-connected. In order to get real progress, therefore we must carry through with the commitment of 26 March, 1991 that all three strands "will be underway within weeks of each other". The sooner we get down to addressing all three sets of discussions, the better. All of us are, of course, protected by the

agreement of 26 March, 1991 that "nothing would be finally agreed in any Strand until everything is agreed in the talks as a whole".

If I may summarise, therefore, we believe that our approach here this morning should be sensible and practical, designed to get us to serious discussions in Strand Two and to allow for the general exchanges which will be necessary in that Strand. The agenda should be structured in broad terms and in a way which can accommodate any issue which any party may wish to raise.