

OPENING STATEMENT ON BEHALF OF THE IRISH GOVERNMENT

Mr Chairman

1 May I begin by expressing formally the appreciation of the Irish Government to the Government of Australia, and to you personally, for your presence here as Chairman of Strand Two. Even before this formal opening, your efforts, and those of your team, have helped significantly the process of our dialogue. We are grateful for this, and feel sure that your able guidance will be an invaluable asset to all the participants as our negotiations in this Strand unfold.

Mr Chairman

This meeting a focus of hope

2 We would all, I think, agree that our meeting today is of historic significance. We might debate whether it has a precedent in 1973, or in 1925, or even earlier. none of us will dispute that it is one of the painfully few instances since 1920 when all the strands of the unionist tradition have sat around a table with representatives of the nationalist tradition in Ireland and reasoned together about a problem which profoundly affects us both. The failure to do so soon enough, or adequately enough, has led to tragedy. Terrorism and evil have rooted in the spaces left by our political failure, and we ignore this sinister development at our peril. The representatives from the Northern Ireland parties need no reminder from me of the scope and horror of the tragedy we are called upon to address. They have experienced its pain directly and personally, but it has touched us all and no part of these islands has been immune.

3 I believe every political leader at this table knows also from first hand contact the deep yearning of our peoples to be shown a way out of the terrible dilemmas which our troubled history has imposed on both our communities in Ireland. In response to that sentiment, we have all taken risks to enable this meeting to go ahead. We in this room are now the focus of hope. We must do our utmost not to disappoint that hope. Failure would not be a neutral development which left things as they were. Because our meeting is an almost unprecedented opportunity, its failure would give rise to a correspondingly deep sense of despondency, perhaps even despair, about the prospects of political progress. No-one here needs any reminder on the evils that flow from political despair in relation to Northern Ireland.

Urgency of finding a solution

4 The divisions we are called upon to resolve are undoubtedly very deep and intractable. Even so, they pale into insignificance when placed beside our common, overriding interest in

peace. I do not think anyone in Ireland, North or South, could become reconciled to the thought that another generation - our children and grandchildren - should relive the horrors we have seen over the past twenty three years. We must never become resigned to the thought that conflict is in some way inevitable or normal in Northern Ireland. On the contrary, it is the product of factors we can identify and influence, even if we cannot fully control them.

5 The immediate horrors of violence are known to all of us. The indirect social and economic effects of the conflict are laying down another legacy of problems that already cast ominous shadows of their own on the future welfare of everyone in both parts of Ireland. In spite of our differences, we are too close not to make common cause at some stage against a problem which threatens us all. Our shared interest in peace, and in the welfare and prosperity of everyone in Ireland, must in the end prevail. Perhaps the real question facing us at this table is not whether an honourable accommodation can be reached to enable both the traditions that share this island to live in harmony. That, I believe, will surely come sooner or later. The question is rather whether we here can achieve this necessary goal, or whether we will pass the problem unresolved to our successors, with perhaps much avoidable suffering before a solution is reached at last. There are political leaders at this table with the authority and prestige earned by a lifetime's political service to their communities. That is an asset which we should not neglect or underestimate. Authority and leadership will undoubtedly be of the utmost importance if we are to achieve that new beginning in relationships which we agree is the goal for our Talks.

Difficulties and Opportunities

6 We begin our deliberations today in the knowledge that our task is daunting. We know there is not full agreement among us even on the cause and nature of the problem, still less about the nature of a solution. We recognise the depth of hatred and fear on both sides and the strength of animosities which have persisted for centuries. We know from experience that efforts to suppress one or other tradition are doomed to failure. At the same time we know that an attempt at accommodating them both, however honourable and imaginative, may be attacked from both sides as a betrayal and that those who advocate this cause may be politically disowned.

7 However, if there are difficulties, there are also points of encouragement. The desire for peace and the willingness to make sacrifices for it, are, I believe, more insistent than ever before, and constitute a strong mandate for negotiation. We have an agreed basis for talks which permits us to address all of the relationships involved in this intractable problem, and to do so comprehensively in the scope and depth they demand. The Northern parties have already had constructive and worthwhile dialogue in Stand One. Today's meeting is another significant, and or some a courageous, step. If it achieves nothing else, it is a recognition that we will never solve our problems by denying each other's existence. That simple acknowledgment and from it I believe only good can flow.

Need for full dialogue between unionist and nationalist tradition

Mr Chairman

8 The division of Ireland, first established by the Government of Ireland Act, gave each tradition in Ireland the opportunity, indeed the incentive, to ignore the reality of the other. Each was diminished as a result. Each remained resolutely barricaded within its own certainties, to preserve the integrity of the supreme argument for or against the border. As a result, the unionist and nationalist traditions in Ireland have never addressed fully and realistically their relationships with each other. A process of mutual discovery is long overdue. Each tradition in Ireland has indulged in the wishful dream that the other existed only in ways convenient for a particular myth. Those two dreams together have produced a nightmare in Northern Ireland. We are called on to set that right.

Need to address both identities

9 If we can acknowledge identities in Ireland in all their complexity, and strike a fair and acceptable balance between them, this meeting could be truly historic in its results. That will require all of us to go into uncharted waters and to visit very fundamental issues last aired between us more than three generations ago, if indeed even then. It will call for courage on all our parts. I accept that unionist leaders in particular may feel they are on dangerous political ground in Strand Two, notwithstanding our rule that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed. They, especially, may fear any return to these issues, but unless we do address them they will continue to haunt us. It may be they will find at the end of this process that those who insist on dealing with the problem in all its complexity - including the real dimensions of nationalist sentiment - are their truest friends. A full and realistic definition of the problem carries the best hope for a generally acceptable and viable solution.

Mr Chairman

Nationalist perspective

10 The members of the Irish Government at this table represent that part of the Irish nationalist tradition which has found political expression in an independent state. We are linked by close bonds to the nationalist community in Northern Ireland, where leading representatives are here with us, and also to communities of Irish descent in many countries overseas who continue to feel ties of affinity and kinship to Ireland. The scars of the historic conflict with our neighbouring island have profoundly marked all branches of the nationalist tradition. The struggle of Irish nationalism to assert its identity has shaped its view and conditioned the attitudes of members of that tradition everywhere. Anything which seems a denial of the nationalist identity; or appears to impose external or arbitrary limits on its expression can arouse profound emotions, which have deep roots in our history. It is not that the nationalist tradition is a narrow one. It embraces openly, even eagerly, wider entities such as the European Union. I do not believe its aspirations are tribal or exclusive. There are perversions of it which are indeed so. However in its doctrine always, and in its practice for the most part, there is full acceptance that there must be room for all traditions, creeds and outlooks. Parnell's dictum that "We cannot afford to lose a single Irish man or Irish woman" summarized the true spirit of Irish nationalism.

Forum Report

11 The constitutional national tradition, for its part, has made a sustained attempt in recent years to reassess its inherited attitudes and positions in the light of the conflict in Northern Ireland. In the hope of initiating a political process leading to a durable solution, political leaders representing over ninety per cent of the nationalist population and almost three-quarters of the entire population of Ireland met in 1983-84 in the New Ireland Forum. They heard submissions from a wide range of interests and deliberated how to shape a new Ireland in which people of differing identities would live together in peace and harmony and in which all traditions would find an honoured place and have equal validity. They analysed the failures of the 1920 settlement on both sides of the border. They recognised that the new Ireland they sought could come about only through agreement, meaning it would have to be freely negotiated and agreed to by the people of the North and by the people of the South. They proclaimed that the validity of both the nationalist and unionist identities in Ireland and the democratic rights of every citizen of this island must be accepted. Both of these identities must have equally satisfactory, secure and durable, political, administrative and symbolic expression and protection.

Forum Report the common point of reference for nationalist parties

12 The Forum Report with its rejection of violence remains a common point of reference for all the democratic nationalist parties in Ireland. Its findings are therefore a departure point for our discussions. While articulating the nationalist view, it fully accepted that constitutional nationalists alone could not determine the structures of an agreed Ireland. It acknowledged that the best people to identify the interests of the unionist tradition were the unionist people themselves. The three pro-union parties represented here did not take part in the Forum. They would probably not accept its findings. I would hope, however they would accept the motives and the goodwill of those who took part. The urgency of finding agreement has in no way diminished since the publication of the Forum Report. We have now at the table those who are qualified above all others to speak for the unionist community. We have therefore an opportunity for a fuller perspective, and the possibility of fresh insight when we come to consider these issues, which was not available in the same measure to those involved in the Forum as they grappled with these same problems and made their recommendations.

Mr Chairman

Nationalist vision respects differences

13 The nationalist vision is one where all the people of Ireland take charge of their own political destiny, in harmony and agreement and with full respect for the differences between them. Our history has established a close link in our minds between independence and self-respect. It is genuinely difficult for members of the nationalist tradition to understand how these ideals could be perceived as threatening by other. Yet, plainly, the reason we are seated at this table is because Irish nationalism is perceived as threatening by the unionist community, or at any rate clearly rejected. Moreover, that rejection takes the form of an insistence on the continuation of British rule in Ireland, the one aspect above all others which

the nationalist tradition finds hardest to accept without a sense of betraying its own past. Our two traditions have been at cross purposes for a hundred years or more on this one issue.

Concern for the unionist position

14 I have spoken of the nationalist perspective, but I would like to make clear that we are concerned also for the position of the unionist community. They are victims, as we are, of the unresolved legacy of our past. We accept the unionist sense of identity is no less valid, and no less worthy than the nationalist one. Their dream of an unquestioned and untroubled enjoyment of their British identity is no less real than the dream of a Northern nationalist for unquestioned and untroubled enjoyment of his or her Irish identity. History has decreed that neither dream can be fulfilled as they would wish. We know that for the unionist community as a whole this recent period has been a time of suffering and of trial. We understand their perplexity that many of the things which seemed a bulwark of their position have disappeared in the course of our century. We know their anxiety that there may be no point of safety between where they now stand and the realization of their worst fears. We have witnessed the dignity and fortitude of the many members of that community who have so wantonly suffered at the hands of terrorism. We know that unionist leaders here have to deal with a deep sense of anger in their community, and a deep suspicion that all political movement must be to their detriment.

Impact of the conflict in the whole island

15 We know, and unionist participants may well confirm, that there is also a unionist sense of grievance that nationalists will not confine themselves to "their" part of the island, as unionists have been prepared to do in the North. We may be told we should make a decisive break with nationalists in Northern Ireland. That is, however, only the mirror image of the demand that Britain should make a decisive break with the unionist community, to enable them to come to terms quickly with Irish unity. One demand is no less and no more legitimate than the other.

16 It is a dilemma for unionism, and a reality for all of us, that the problem is not external to Northern Ireland, although its origins, and almost certainly its solution, lie in the wider relationships. The focus of the conflict is in Northern Ireland, but we do not have the choice of dissociating ourselves from the problem, even if we wanted to. Since the conflict began, our jails have been filled with hundreds of people, many from Northern Ireland, convicted on charges relating to it. More than a hundred people have been killed in our jurisdiction, including members of our security forces also. The additional security costs arising from the conflict have been some two and a half billion pounds and impose a burden on our taxpayers proportionately several times higher than that borne by the taxpayer in Northern Ireland or Great Britain. Almost every sector of our economy has been at one time or another adversely affected, and sometimes very seriously so. There are cogent practical, as well as moral reasons, why we have an overwhelming interest in peace.

Partition did not resolve the conflicting aspirations

17 Partition sought to resolve the conflicting aspirations of majority and minority in Ireland by dividing the island in two. Unfortunately, the arrangement created new minority -

Northern nationalists - in effect transposing the problem into the "narrow ground" of Northern Ireland. The conflict, in its essence, is now about whether unionists should finally settle for minority status in the island as a whole or whether Northern nationalists should do so within the confines of Northern Ireland. Some people kill, and many more tolerate killing - on both sides - because of their fears that this choice will be resolved the wrong way.

Ways of addressing problem

18 There are various ways we here could disarm those murderous fears: We could find a way of ending our political divisions. We could find a way of purging the concepts of "majority" and "minority" from the fears and passions at present associated with them. We could find a way of accommodating and regulating our differences and agreeing fair and acceptable rules for change. The Irish Government will be open to any of these approaches, or any combination of them, that is consistent with the goal stated in the Anglo-Irish Agreement or reconciling and acknowledging "the rights of the two major traditions that exist in Ireland, represented on the one hand by those who wish for no change in the present status of Northern Ireland and on the other hand by those who aspire to a sovereign united Ireland achieved by peaceful means and through agreement".

Problem of two sets of conflicting rights

19 The problem we have to resolve in relation to Northern Ireland is the notoriously difficult one of two sets of conflicting rights. There is no argument for the self-determination of the unionist community that cannot be applied with at least equal force, to the nationalist community in Northern Ireland. That community sees itself locked into a political entity in bitterly opposed. Its aspiration to independence was denied. It was cut off from the rest of Ireland and consigned to minority status which repeated itself inexorably at every level of politics and society. The symbols of the state, like the working of majority rule, might be neutral in Great Britain. They were - and are - both far from neutral in Northern Ireland.

Real poles of the problem

20 The poles of the problem we are called on to resolve are not between two rival views of how Northern Ireland should be governed within the UK. There have been many attempts to redefine the problem in these more manageable terms and they have all failed. The poles of the problem are between those who resent the very existence of Northern Ireland and those who see its existence, and its British status, as vital for their identity. It could be tempting to say these two things are irreconcilable and to decide, very simply, to support the bigger of the two communities. That however was tried, and its failure is why we are here.

Possibility of new and more broadly based structure

21 The Irish Government in accepting the basis for our Talks made clear that we would be prepared to consider a new and more broadly based structure if such an arrangement can be arrived at through direct discussion or negotiation between all the parties concerned. We do not see such an undertaking as conflicting in any way with our commitment to the Anglo-Irish Agreement as an international treaty which binds both Governments unless or until there is joint agreement to modify it. We do not feel that the goal of our negotiations should be to

dismantle any gains which have been made in the relationships between the two Governments. Its outcome should not undermine their cooperation on a problem which is clearly of the utmost concern to both. The Agreement has functioned, or has the potential to function, on many different levels. It is a practical instrument for consultation and cooperation in the political, legal, economic and security fields. It is a recognition, even if only an oblique one, both of the legitimate aspirations of the nationalist community in Northern Ireland and of that community's right to pursue them and to have them fulfilled on certain conditions. It is a formal acceptance that the Irish Government have both a concern and a role in relation to Northern Ireland. We would expect that any broader agreement which might be reached would incorporate these elements in full measure. Otherwise something of value would be lost.

22 The challenge facing us is to accommodate two differing senses of identity, and to do so in a way that is accepted by all. The endorsement which new arrangements will need cannot be achieved for a result where one tradition has the substance of its aspiration and the other merely a theoretical acknowledgment of legitimacy. We must avoid any situation where the active or inertial forces of the administration act on the self-fulfilling assumption that these aspirations will never be realised. If both aspirations are legitimate, there must be parity of esteem and equivalence of treatment in a practical sense, and not just on the level of abstraction. We must transcend the context which was designed to prevent the realization of the aspirations of one tradition.

Advantage to unionism of a generally accepted arrangement

23 It may be objected that unionists could have nothing to gain from such a recognition of the nationalist aspiration. I believe on the contrary they could win an inestimable prize. They could for the first time have a role in Ireland which did not rely on external guarantee, or on assertions of dominance, as necessary defence of their identity. The nationalist tradition in Ireland as a whole is the source of unionist fears. It is also the source of the only guarantee which will be truly reliable and which can liberate them from those fears, which we accept as real, however, much we believe them to be unfounded.

Need to address all aspects in depth

24 I have spoken plainly and openly, because I believe it is important from the outset to address the problem in its full dimension. The measure of peace in our island will be the depth of our understanding of how we share it. We should not expect miracles of conversion from unionism to nationalism, but neither should we expect them in reverse. We need to address our rival constitutional perspectives in full. We need to address the symbols we each have inherited and which all too often appear to the other tradition as reminders of a hateful past, or of a future threat. We need to address the practical issues which divide us.

Common interests, including the European dimension

25 We must recall also, however, the matters which unite us and build on them. There is the concern and commitment which brought each of us here to seek progress towards peace. There is the enormous fund of goodwill we could mobilize if we approached that goal. There are bonds of history and culture which we all share, however diverse our traditions. There are

economic imperatives which affect both parts of Ireland, as small open economies in a peripheral location. At the end of the year, the last remaining barriers to trade will come down across the breadth of the European Community. These developments will affect relations between North and South in Ireland. We have a shared identity as fellow citizens of the new Europe. We are jointly participating in the steps which are being taken to realise European Union. I hope that the removal of trade barriers this year will be followed, in the years ahead, by an ever greater recognition of our common European destiny. This should also erode the less tangible barriers which have for too long prevented both parts of the island from realizing their full economic potential and from developing a much stronger single island economy. Clearly, the full benefits of cooperation have yet to be explored and achieved in many sectors.

26 We are living through times of unprecedented change in human society and political structures alike. The development of European Union promises to transform our political and economic environment. Issues of sovereignty and borders not longer mean what they meant in the days of Lloyd George. The European Community offers new points of reference, new possibilities free of the connotations of the past. These could be invaluable assets, if we chose to use them, in the process of agreeing our relationships in this island we are destined to share. We are all perhaps wiser now than we were twenty years ago, or seventy years ago, about what we can, and cannot, demand of each other. We have learned the hard way that nothing can produce lasting stability that is not based on free consent.

27 Let us in this crucial dialogue seek to put these new insights, learned at such great cost, into practical form, in a way that will enable us to liberate each other from the mistakes of our past. No party here, acting alone, can achieve that liberation satisfactorily for itself. Each party around this table has one of the necessary keys to a solution. Working together we have indeed within our grasp the creation of a new beginning for all our relations. It is in that spirit, with a clear-sighted acceptance of the full scope of the problem and with a firm resolve to contribute to a solution to it, that the Irish Government embark on these negotiations.