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ANNEX A

(19 July)

TALKS, [22 JULY] - POSSIBLE STATEMENT BY SECRETARY OF STATE IN ANY
"SPLEEN VENTING" SESSION

1. Mr Chairman, since we last met round this table to confer on the rules of procedure for these negotiations the Province has experienced some of the darkest days in the history of the past 25 years.

2. Those days were marked by violence and the threat of violence. One man was killed in circumstances which have all the hallmarks of a sectarian murder. Another has been killed amid scenes of violent public disorder. Three policemen were shot and injured and many other people throughout the Province injured in one way or another as a result of the wave of violence which was unleashed. Dozens of people were intimidated from their homes. The public were prevented from going about their lawful occasions by illegal blockades backed up by blatant intimidation. A major hotel has been blown up. Widespread disruption and fear were generated in Dublin by a hoax bomb call. There has been huge damage to property throughout Northern Ireland, which will cost millions of pounds to put right. At times we seemed only a hairsbreadth away from a full scale resumption of republican and loyalist terrorism throughout Northern Ireland, with consequent risks to life and property throughout these islands. Public and business confidence in Northern Ireland, whether as a tourist destination, a place to invest in or simply somewhere to live, has taken a sharp knock and put back all the advances of recent years. The level of suspicion and fear between the two major political traditions in Northern Ireland is higher than I have ever known it. Even the relationship between the two Governments - despite their joint determination to work constructively together -

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has been under some strain. Above all, confidence in the democratic process, in the rule of law and in the possibility of a generally acceptable political accommodation have been stretched, close to breaking point.

3. The situation could hardly be more grave.

4. There is much to regret and criticise in the events of recent days but I do not wish to engage in that luxury, or to cast the first stone.

5. What I believe we must do, individually and collectively, is to re-establish our commitment to the core values of civilised society and to re-assert our absolute determination to seek a peaceful resolution of the political tensions which lie beneath the surface of recent events.

6. For my part, on behalf of the British Government, I wish to restate our fundamental commitment to exercise jurisdiction in Northern Ireland with rigorous impartiality on behalf of all the people of Northern Ireland in their diversity. Our approach will continue to be based on full respect for, and equality of, civil, political, social and cultural rights and freedom from discrimination for all citizens; on parity of esteem; and on just and equal treatment for the identity, ethos and aspirations of both communities.

7. Against that background, I acknowledge - and commit myself and my Government to face - a number of challenges.

8. We will support the RUC and the army in upholding law and order, without fear or favour, throughout Northern Ireland; and in rebuilding public confidence in their ability and will to do so.

9. As to the particular issue which served as a lightning rod for the underlying political tensions - the routing of particular parades

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- there is a clear need to find a better way of balancing legitimate rights to march and demonstrate one's identity with the equal rights of others in the community not to be intimidated or seriously inconvenienced by such demonstrations. I have announced my intention to establish an independent review. I trust this will help the search for mutually acceptable arrangements in relation to the routine and conduct of parades in future.

10. I have to say, however, that I believe that this issue is only one symptom of a deeper malaise and that it will be easier to resolve in the context of a functioning political accommodation between the two main political traditions in Northern Ireland and indeed between those living on the island of Ireland more generally.

11. That brings me back to the fundamental challenge facing all of us round this table. Can we, through open, honest, committed dialogue reach agreement on a comprehensive political settlement which could defuse intercommunal tension in Northern Ireland and underpin a lasting peace?

12. This talks process provides the necessary mechanism. With its wide participation and open agenda it provides the best and most positive answer to those who fear that Northern Ireland may be about to fall back into the hell from which it had emerged. We as politicians committed to the principles of democracy and non-violence set out in the report of the International Body have the opportunity and the responsibility to demonstrate that there is a political way forward, a peaceful route to a settlement of ancient quarrels.

13. One further challenge facing us is to correct some of the misperceptions which have abounded about the talks process. I fear that some at least of the concerns in the Unionist community which were reflected in the protest action inspired by the Orange order were based on a distorted view of the handling and objectives of the talks process. Those concerns are misplaced and we all have a duty to make that clear. The objective of the talks process is to find an

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accommodation which is - at a minimum - likely to prove acceptable to at least a majority in each of the two main political traditions in Northern Ireland. Mr McCartney has wisely reminded us that as a matter of political reality any agreement will need to secure broad support right across the community in Northern Ireland.

14. There is therefore no question of undermining or threatening the rights or identity of either tradition.

15. We are embarked on a political negotiation which could bring solid benefits to all the people of these islands - except the gunmen - and which does not require anyone to sacrifice their fundamental political interests. There are inbuilt safeguards at every stage to ensure that there is no question of one tradition being dominated by another.

16. The backdrop provided by recent events is a sombre one; but the talks process gives us the opportunity to provide a positive lead and to seize the initiative from those who would seek to drag the Province back into the nightmare of violence. Earlier this month we were tantalisingly close to agreement on an effective and widely acceptable negotiating framework and I know that Senator Mitchell and his colleagues had intensive bilaterals with delegations last week about outstanding points of difficulty. Our objective now must be to adopt generally acceptable rules of procedure and demonstrate real forward movement in the talks, to give hope to all those in the community who are looking for principled leadership towards a peaceful resolution of the situation.

17. Others will no doubt wish to register their own positions on these important matters, but I trust they will - so far as possible - avoid recriminations, look forward and take the opportunity to rededicate themselves to the search for a principled political accommodation.

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