

NORTHERN IRELAND TALKS: POINTS TO MAKE ON SUSPENSION

1. The multi-party negotiations have had to be suspended because the approach of the General Election and of the District Council elections in Northern Ireland has inhibited the prospects for reaching agreement.
2. The talks participants are currently addressing the difficult and sensitive issue of decommissioning. There are deeply held views on all sides and it would be difficult enough to reach an agreement without the added pressure of an imminent election.
3. The talks participants have been working hard on this issue - in written and oral presentations, in plenary discussions of each others' positions, in bilateral and multilateral meetings of various sorts and in discussions with the Independent Chairmen. Several areas of potential convergence have been identified. Although there is not currently a sufficient basis of agreement to reach a successful determination on the issue of decommissioning, it remains possible that the participants could reach agreement after the election period.
4. Looking further ahead, the talks process continues to offer a viable and democratic means of achieving a comprehensive political settlement in relation to Northern Ireland. With its broad agenda and involving, as it does, both Governments and all those Northern Ireland political parties committed to exclusively peaceful means, it is capable of addressing all the issues which need to be resolved if there is to be a widely acceptable political settlement which could underpin lasting peace.
5. All the participants have objectives which can only be secured through a political negotiation with a broad agenda, capable of addressing future arrangements for the government of Northern Ireland, the future relationship between the two

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parts of Ireland and the future relationship between the British and Irish Governments. This talks process offers them the opportunity to achieve those objectives in a way which also protects every participant's vital interests. The rules of procedure provide for impartial independent chairmanship where appropriate and make clear that any decisions must be supported by parties representing at least a majority in each part of the community.

6. The talks are tackling the legacy of years of distrust, suspicion and division, exacerbated by violence. It would have been foolish to have expected a rapid, dramatic breakthrough. However, the two Governments and the nine participating parties have been meeting regularly since last June and have a much clearer idea of each other's positions on a wide range of issues as well as developing useful informal contacts. They have agreed a set of fair, comprehensive and balanced rules of procedure and determined an agenda. All this provides a viable foundation for taking the negotiations forward more rapidly after the election period.
7. (Defensive) Under the legislation the Secretary of State is required to suspend the operation of the Northern Ireland Forum if it appears to him that the talks are suspended. The operation of the Forum would in any event come to an end at the end of May 1997. The Forum can be reactivated by Order for a further year and we would expect this to happen once the talks resume.

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