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10 October 1996

This government has made clear its approach to the search for peace in Northern Ireland on many occasions. But we continue to be asked about this or that aspect, particularly about the multi-party negotiations which started on 10 June in Belfast. There has been continued speculation about a new IRA ceasefire, despite the latest huge arms and explosives find in London. This has renewed questions about what effect this would have on the negotiations, and our approach to these negotiations. It may therefore be helpful to spell out our position again.

The negotiations have one overriding aim; to reach an overall political settlement, achieved through agreement and founded on consent. They will address all the issues relevant to such a settlement. Inclusive in nature, they involve both governments and all the relevant political parties with the necessary democratic mandate and commitment to exclusively peaceful methods.

It is important to emphasise that all parties are treated equally in the negotiations in accordance with the scale of their democratic mandate. But no one party can prevent them continuing by withdrawing from the negotiations. No party has an undemocratic advantage.

The prospects for success in these negotiations will obviously be much greater if they take place in a peaceful environment. Under the legislation setting up the talks, if there was an unequivocal restoration of the IRA ceasefire of August 1994, Sinn Féin would be invited to nominate a team to participate, from that point, in the negotiations. Beyond the unequivocal restoration of the IRA ceasefire the British and Irish governments are agreed that these negotiations are without preconditions.

It is equally clear that, to be successful, the negotiations must be based on exclusively democratic and peaceful means. There must be no recourse to the threat (actual or implied) or use of violence or coercion. So on entering the negotiations each participant needs to make clear their total and absolute commitment to the principles of democracy and non-violence set out in the Report of the International Body chaired by Senator George Mitchell. The parties in the talks have all done just that already.

The range of issues on which an overall agreement will depend means that the negotiations will be on the basis of a comprehensive agenda. This will be adopted by agreement. Each participant will be able to raise any significant issue of concern to them, and to receive a fair hearing for those concerns, without this being subject to the veto of any other party. Any aspect can be raised, including constitutional issues and any other matter which any party considers relevant. No negotiated outcome is either predetermined or excluded in advance or limited by anything other than the

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Among the crucial issues is decommissioning which must be resolved without blocking the negotiations. So the opening plenary will address the International Body's proposals on decommissioning of illegal arms. At that stage and without blocking the negotiations, we, along with the Irish government, will be looking for the commitment of all participants to work constructively during the negotiations to implement all aspects of the International Body's report.

It is essential that all participants negotiate in good faith, seriously address all areas of the agreed agenda and make every effort to reach a comprehensive agreement. For their part, the two governments are committed to ensure that all items on the comprehensive agenda are fully addressed. They will do so themselves with a view to overcoming any obstacles which may arise.

For our part, we are wholly committed to upholding our responsibility to encourage, facilitate and enable agreement in the negotiations. This must be based on full respect for the rights and identities of both traditions. We want to see peace, stability and reconciliation established by agreement.

We are also determined to see these negotiations through successfully, as speedily as possible. This is in line with the hopes and aspirations of people in both the United Kingdom and the Irish Republic. These have already given momentum to a process which will always have difficulties. The British and Irish governments are committed to an agreed timeframe and calendar for the conduct of the negotiations. We have already proposed that a plenary meeting should be held at a suitable date to take stock of progress in the negotiating as a whole. The two governments will also review progress at regular intervals including at a summit meeting to be held before the end of the year.

Meanwhile we are committed to raising confidence, both through the talks and through a range of other measures alongside them. The International Body's report itself proposes a process of mutual confidence-building.

So we will continue to pursue social and economic policies based on the principles of equality of opportunity, equity of treatment and parity of esteem irrespective of political, cultural or religious affiliations or gender. This will ensure that there is just and equal treatment for the identity, ethos and aspiration of both communities, including equal treatment for the Irish language and culture.

We are also committed to the creation of a policing service which can enjoy the support of the entire community.

It is worth recalling that, in response to the ceasefires of Autumn 1994 and the changed level of threat, we undertook a series of confidence-building measures. These included changed arrangements for release of prisoners in Northern Ireland under the Northern Ireland (Remission of Sentences) Act 1995, security force deployments, a review of emergency legislation and others. If the threat reduces again, the opportunity for further confidence-

building measures returns.

But confidence-building is a two way street. Support for the use of violence is incompatible with participation in the democratic process. An end to punishment beatings and other paramilitary activities, including surveillance and targetting, would demonstrate real commitment to peaceful methods and help build trust.

The opportunity for progress has never been greater. The negotiations are widely supported internationally. Accordingly we welcome the contribution of the European Union to the resolution of the problem. Likewise we welcome the interest and involvement of the United States arising from the special affinity shared between all the peoples of these islands and people in the United States. In particular we welcome the contribution of areas of successful conflict resolution such as South Africa. The negotiations also benefit from independent chairmen from the USA, Canada and Finland and have the overwhelming support of peoples throughout these islands. They want them to take place in a peaceful environment, free of all violence. That is our aim too.