



NORTHERN IRELAND Information Service

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SECRETARY OF STATE ANNOUNCES LAUNCH OF SUBSTANTIVE NEGOTIATIONS

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Dr Marjorie Mowlam MP, today announced the start of substantive negotiations on the three strands of the multi-party talks.

Speaking after this afternoon's plenary, Dr Mowlam announced that:

"The participants in the multi-party negotiations, meeting in plenary session, have today approved a procedural motion which concluded the business of the opening plenary session and launched the three strands of substantive political negotiations.

"Additionally, they agreed to establish two sub-Committees to help make further progress on decommissioning and other confidence building measures alongside progress in the three strands; and the two Governments have established an Independent Commission on decommissioning."

Commenting on these developments she said:

"These decisions represent a significant change in the nature of the talks process. They reflect the widespread view within the community in Northern Ireland and more widely that the time has come to move beyond the essentially procedural business of the opening plenary session and to commence substantive political negotiations leading to a comprehensive political settlement which adequately addresses the totality of relationships.

"These decisions also reflect a general sense that the important preliminary and procedural matters which need to be settled if the negotiations are to proceed in an effective and unbiased manner have been sufficiently addressed and needed to be brought to a resolution.

"The procedural motion therefore brought the opening plenary session to an orderly conclusion. The Business Committee will now meet as soon as practicable to provide advice to the Chairmen of the relevant strands on the structure, timing and sequencing of the substantive negotiations, and those negotiations will now begin to make real progress.

"The British and Irish Governments regret that two parties eligible to participate in these negotiations were not present today. We reaffirm our desire to see the Democratic Unionist Party and the UK Unionist Party return to this process, to represent their electorates, to bring their analysis and their intellect to bear, to make their own contribution to the search for a widely acceptable political settlement. Whether or not they choose to rejoin the negotiations, our doors will remain open to them and we will continue to try to give due weight to their views. But their input would be more effective if it was made directly and robustly within the multi-party negotiations.

"Today we have turned an important page in the history of Northern Ireland. The new chapter we shall be writing will involve inclusive and substantive negotiations, taking place in a peaceful atmosphere. Such talks have the potential to bring huge benefits to all the people of these islands and especially the people of Northern Ireland.

"If we are to realise that potential, much hard work will be required. These negotiations will not be easy. There will be many frustrations, many disagreements, many obstacles to overcome. All the participants will need courage and imagination. But the machinery is now in place for a fair and effective negotiation, capable of addressing all the issues of concern to all participants and leading to a political settlement which will be widely acceptable throughout the community in Northern Ireland, throughout the island of Ireland and throughout these islands. No-one has anything to fear from seeking such a settlement. Everyone's essential interests are protected. Everyone has much to gain.

"We rededicate ourselves, and appeal to all the other talks participants, to seize the opportunity."