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**SPEECH BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE, THE RT HON DR MARJORIE MOWLAM MP, AT
TODAY'S MEETING IN LONDON OF THE BRITISH-IRISH INTER-PARLIAMENTARY BODY**

Thank you.

I am delighted to have this opportunity to speak to the 14th Plenary Session of this Body.

I would like to begin by paying tribute to the outgoing co-chairmen, Peter Temple-Morris and Paul Bradford. I know they have served this Body well. I think it is fair to say that Peter particularly has seen the Body flourish from its beginnings.

I would also like to congratulate Michael O'Kennedy and David Winnick on their appointments as new co-chairmen of the Body. I wish them a productive and enjoyable period in office.

My Ministerial colleagues and I would be glad to give them whatever support we can in the years to come.

Today I look forward to answering your questions.

But I would first like to talk with you about:

what I believe our aims and objectives as a British Government should be;

to reflect on what - working together with the Irish Government and the parties in Northern Ireland - has been achieved since the election in May;

and to look forward to what I hope will emerge from these negotiations.

The new Government was elected on the basis of clear principles.

Principles of fairness, justice and equality of opportunity.

They are at the heart of our party's constitution, they are at the heart of our manifesto and they underpin everything we do.

They matter most of all in Northern Ireland because the history of unfairness, injustice and inequality still impinges on politics there today.

We began by saying that any approach to Northern Ireland's many problems must take account of economic, social and political factors.

And that political dialogue - talking - is the only means by which a fair, long term political settlement in Northern Ireland can be achieved.

Alongside that, we want to see a peaceful and stable background for economic growth.

We want to see a political settlement that will have the broad support of both sides of the community and the consent of the people. Working together we are moving towards that goal.

It does not require compromise of people's basic loyalties, nor of their basic principles. But it does require that people reach out to one another, establish the common ground and build on what they find there.

People across Northern Ireland in all walks of life have been doing that for years.

Now, for the first time in 70 years, the political representatives of all shades of opinion in Northern Ireland are engaged in talks designed to build on what they have in common, not what sets them apart.

The British Government and the Irish Government are only two participants in the process. Paul Murphy is leading our team. He is working very closely with David Andrews and was before him, Ray Burke.

Along with talks chairs, George Mitchell, John de Chastelain and Harri Holkeri, we are there with the Northern Ireland parties tackling an agenda which for the first time has a real chance of dealing with the concerns on both sides of the community.

The British and Irish Governments have been working closely together for a number of years now. The Anglo-Irish Agreement, the Downing Street Declaration and the Joint Framework Document are a testament to that work.

Wherever possible, principles have been established and accommodation sought.

The principles of agreement and consent are now at the heart of the talks.

Agreement between the parties within the talks, and the consent of the people of Northern Ireland.

It is for the people of Northern Ireland to decide whether they wish to remain part of the United Kingdom or be part of a united Ireland.

There will be no change in Northern Ireland's status as part of the UK without the clear consent of a majority of the people who live there.

First we have to get agreement in the talks. Some people believe the positions of the parties are irreconcilable. I disagree.

Like Tony Blair, I am not dewy-eyed. I know that the nearer we get to agreement, the more difficult it will be.

But we have a carefully constructed and agreed format for the talks. And a goal to reach agreement by May next year.

Since moving into substantive negotiations the participants have produced a number of papers on the key issues which need to be resolved if there is to be a settlement.

We have not so far seen specific, focused deal making on the key issues. This is not surprising. We are less than two months into substantive talks. The process was never going to be easy. There are real difficulties to be grappled with.

But we have seen an increasing level of engagement during the last two weeks since the process moved into a period of intensive bilaterals.

These bilaterals, and those held by the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach, are a crucial complement to the round table talks. They are not of course a substitute for them. All parties will have to participate in the negotiation of any settlement.

It is the review plenary this week. My hope is that we can make real progress.

We have had some useful discussions, and the possible elements of an overall settlement are beginning to be discernible.

It will certainly include a formal recognition of the consent principle in all its aspects, reflected in amendments to relevant constitutional legislation.

It is likely to include locally elected institutions of government in Northern Ireland, established on a widely accepted basis.

There are likely to be north-south structures with real responsibility but which are accountable to government institutions in Northern Ireland and the Republic.

There is also likely to be standing intergovernmental machinery between the British and Irish governments, and some wider structures to include not only the British and Irish governments but also the Northern Ireland administration, and representatives of devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales.

And there will be a need for effective safeguards for human rights and arrangements to ensure equality.

There are delicate balances to be struck within and between all these key elements, and much painstaking negotiation will be required on the details.

But I know that a settlement is possible.

The talks participants have it in their power to reach agreement on new arrangements which could win the full-hearted support of both main political traditions.

For our part, we will continue to help drive the process forward.

Prime Minister, Tony Blair, has been direct and up-front.

From the very beginning in May, he has continually shown his personal commitment to move the process on rapidly.

Alongside the talks we have also advanced the pace of change.

Here again principles of fairness, justice and equality underpin our approach.

There will be no second class citizens in Northern Ireland.

We are determined to see respect for the rights and freedoms of *everyone*.

We are committed to building a society where different identities are treated equally and with respect.

This has been called confidence building.

But it is really about giving everyone in Northern Ireland the same rights and privileges enjoyed in peaceful and democratic societies across the world. That is how I would like our programme to be seen:

- to guarantee human rights;
- to combat discrimination in the labour market;
- to reach accommodation over parades; and

- to make policing more accountable and acceptable to both communities.

These measures are important to all in the community.

We have already published a White Paper on the incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights into Law in Britain and Northern Ireland.

Further provisions will be examined with the parties in the talks which might be appropriate for the unique circumstances of Northern Ireland.

We are seeking to increase confidence in *policing* through the establishment of clear objectives; changes in policing structures; greater accountability and the creation of an independent complaints system.

As the recent report of the Standing advisory Commission On Human Rights reflects, a great deal of progress has been made in the area of *employment equality* since the Fair Employment Act was passed by the last Labour government in 1976.

The SACHR Report contains over 160 recommendations. It reflects a thorough and wide ranging analysis of the various elements affecting equality of opportunity in employment.

I am grateful for the work which SACHR has put into its review. It is helping to shape our policies not only on fair employment but also on provision for the unemployed and the socially disadvantaged.

Many of SACHR's ideas on tackling long-term unemployment are close to our own policies on the New Deal.

We have already done other things to show our commitment to the employment equality issue. We have launched an audit of TSN in every Northern Ireland department to measure their individual success. We're also looking to resolve complaints quicker, to strengthen action against persistent discrimination and to clarify the law on recruiting from the unemployed.

All of SACHR's recommendations have been subject to extensive assessment in recent months by officials.

They are very advanced in that work, and we intend to publish a full paper later in the Winter.

On the economic front, there is new hope and confidence amongst the business community in Northern Ireland. Unemployment has halved in a year, there are new jobs, new opportunities and new investment from home and abroad.

Northern Ireland benefits from great international goodwill.

I thank all those who support Northern Ireland economically. It is good for business, and it's good for peace.

New opportunities are springing from the new atmosphere in Northern Ireland.

Already those charged with security have been able to announce prudent steps in response to the reduced threat on the streets.

There has been a significant de-escalation throughout Northern Ireland since July, building on those measures taken during the previous cease-fire but never reversed.

Military activity throughout Northern Ireland has reduced by around a third, there are no military patrols in Belfast, Londonderry and Newry town centres, RUC foot patrols are unaccompanied in West Belfast during the day and a battalion of soldiers have been re-located to the mainland.

On Tuesday 25 November the Chief Constable was further able to announce the ending of Army support for RUC foot patrols in West Belfast. This is a significant and widely welcomed step.

Further steps like this on the road to normality will be taken when possible. This will depend entirely on the level of threat

prevailing at the time and the assessment made by the Chief Constable and General Officer Commanding, of that threat.

People in Northern Ireland should enjoy a normal environment of civil rights too. The legislation to implement the North report which is now before Parliament is based on the approach of rights and responsibilities.

The right to march (or a peaceful assembly) is a basic right which brings with it the responsibility to respect the rights of freedoms of others.

Where rights conflict, an accommodation has to be found.

The aim of our legislation, and the work of the Independent Parades Commission, is designed to make accommodation possible where it has not been in the past.

If that fails, the Commission will have the power to make a fair and balanced decision on how and where parades should go ahead, taking into account the wider interests of the whole community.

Prison issues, as the Mitchell Report recognised, are important for people in both communities.

The Government has already taken action to promote confidence in this area:

more than 240 prisoners have been released early since 1995;

prisoners on temporary transfer to Northern Ireland are now eligible for temporary release under local rules and most of the prisoners have already taken periods of leave release under the new arrangements;

6 Republican prisoners and 9 other prisoners have already been repatriated from England and Wales to the Republic of Ireland;

the Home Secretary has recently agreed the repatriation of 3 republican prisoners; further applications are under consideration by the two governments

since 1992, 14 prisoners have been transferred to Northern Ireland and a further 15 have been temporarily transferred; only one case remains in the pipeline and a decision is expected shortly;

I have directed that reviews of life sentence cases will now take place more frequently to ensure that the process continues to take account of the changed circumstances of the cease-fires.

So we have already responded in a real and flexible way.

Further movement will continue to be consistent with our principles to ensure the safety of the public and maintain the confidence of the community in a modern criminal justice system.

We recognise that the events in Northern Ireland have not happened in isolation. They are interwoven in the difficulties and upheavals of our troubled past.

My approach throughout has been to say that we should understand the past, to recognise its importance, but not to live in it.

Some episodes in the past - like the events at Bloody Sunday - live with us still. The pain and distress of the families of the Bloody Sunday victims is very clearly still there after 25 years.

That is why we have studied carefully the material presented to us by the Irish Government and by the families of those who were killed and injured.

We cannot remove their pain and suffering with words alone.

No options have been ruled out, but I am not yet in a position to say what action we will take.

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I will make a statement as soon as possible. I hope that will be very soon.

I have concentrated today on matters that I hope are of concern to you.

They are of concern to us all, and to especially people in Northern Ireland.

Their lives, the lives of families, the lives of young people, have been blighted by year after year of violence and bloodshed.

It is time for that to end for good.

I believe we reached a turning point in the history of our two nations. Arguments that have raged for decades are being brought to the table and discussed.

Not always calmly, always with passion.

I would expect no less.

Both communities in Northern Ireland - Unionist and Nationalist - are proud of their histories, proud of their identities, proud of their traditions.

Just as we in our respective countries have been proud of these things.

As the existence of this Body shows, we have been able to reach out to one another and to work together. With our pride intact.

I have long hoped to see, and believe I am beginning to see, the parties in Northern Ireland start to do the same.

Of course there are differences and disagreements. All relationships thrive on those.

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But they also thrive on the principles and objectives that they share.

In Northern Ireland that means a lasting peaceful political settlement. It is what the people who live there hope and pray for every day.

This Body has the supportive and constructive role to play in helping to bring that about.

So I thank you for asking me here to speak to you today and I look forward to working with you throughout this Parliament and beyond.

ENDS