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Ulster Democratic Party

Strand One Opening Statement

7th October 1997

Delivered by Gary McMichael, lead negotiator in Strand One

Mr. Chairman,

Today represents a truly historic opportunity for the elected representatives of the people of Northern Ireland. We have a real opportunity to lay the foundations for a new society within Northern Ireland. A society based on fairness, equality and respect for our differences as well as an appreciation of our commonality.

The three strands of negotiations upon which we are now embarked are important to the search for an agreement which will address, in a truly genuine manner, the full totality of relationships throughout the British Isles. But, while each strand is extremely important in an individual sense, we must not forget that the fundamental relationship which must be addressed - and upon which this whole process hinges - is that between the divided people of Northern Ireland.

If we cannot find a means by which to bridge the divisions which exist, and unite the Northern Ireland community in support for new agreed structures of governance, then the work in the other strands is for nothing. For it is the people of Northern Ireland who hold the key to peace. That is the reality of this process. It is in recognition of this fact that the process is bound by the basic principle of

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consent, and the fundamental requirement for the support of the people of Northern Ireland at referendum for any outcome of this negotiation process.

Clear parameters exist which guide our journey towards agreement. If nothing else the past thirty years of conflict have taught us that there are limits beyond which the people of Northern Ireland will neither retreat nor be forced.

Thirty years of republican aggression against the pro-union community and the violent sectarian oppression of the Protestant tradition has not succeeded in forcing the assimilation of Northern Ireland into an Irish unitary state.

Attempted political coercion such as the imposition of the Anglo-Irish Agreement has not crushed the will of the people. A settlement cannot be imposed upon Northern Ireland against the wishes of its people. Opposition to the Agreement remains as formidable today as it did in 1985. It is illegitimate, unrepresentative and is an impediment to political progress and must be replaced by an agreement arrived at by consensus within this Talks process.

However a collective failure to face up to the realities of our divided society has been the main impediment to resolving our problems. Severe challenges face republicans in this process, not least that of dealing with the aforementioned democratic parameters of any prospective settlement. But I don't pretend for one moment that there aren't challenges which must also be faced up to by unionism.

It is an inescapable reality that a sizeable minority of the population of Northern Ireland hold a fundamentally different view than unionists and have real and legitimate concerns which must be addressed in the search for a settlement.

We have no doubt that compromise and accommodation can be reached between Catholics and Protestants, unionists and nationalists in Northern Ireland, however it is impossible to compromise on the existence of Northern Ireland itself- it either exists or it doesn't. At present it exists and is a part of the United

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Kingdom. This situation may not be the whole-hearted wish of everyone in the province but must be recognised to be the wish of most.

It is clear that the majority of people in Northern Ireland, stretching across both main religious traditions, view Northern Ireland's continued membership of the union as the best way forward for the people as a whole. That is an undeniable fact.

Equally it is clear that there is no consent for a return to a hierarchical system of governance. Every person must feel able to play a full and equal role in a new Northern Ireland society without fear of prejudice, discrimination or persecution, at the hands of either another tradition, the state or armed groups.

The people of Northern Ireland are unique. The historical and political divisions which have been personified by the inter-community conflict which has plagued our land, together with the fear and distrust we share, has shrouded the true extent of commonality between us.

The people who live in the Shankill and those who live in the Falls have more in common with each other than their perceived counterparts in London or in Dublin. Shared experience over the past thirty years in particular has ensured that. The objective of these Talks as a whole must be to strip away the fear and distrust and create new structures which will command the support and confidence of the entire Northern Ireland community.

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In the course of these negotiations the Ulster Democratic Party shall present proposals for the establishment of;

- a) Devolved legislative government for Northern Ireland and a written constitution. A set of constitutional laws agreed by Ulster Catholics and Protestants together which will lay the foundations on which to build a new progressive democracy. An agreement instituted by Ulster people at referendum which can only be changed by Ulster people at referendum
- b) A modern democratic political structure based on consensus government, proportional representation and shared responsibility.
- c) A Northern Ireland Bill of Rights.
- d) A supreme court charged with the responsibility to uphold constitutional law and safeguard the rights of the individual as represented in the Bill of Rights.
- e) Comprehensive arrangements for co-operation between Northern Ireland and the other regions of the United Kingdom. We envisage a council of the British Isles which could be an instrument for meaningful co-operation not only between UK regions but throughout the British Isles.

It is our firm conviction that the vast majority of both religious communities long for peace, reconciliation and the chance to create a better future for their children. But longing is not enough; we must create a mechanism through these negotiations which can harness the love, generosity, courage and integrity of Ulster people and direct its great power towards a new beginning.