

STRAND 2: CHAIRMAN'S OPENING STATEMENT

1. Introduce self and George Thompson, PS. Have already met Governments and a number of the members, in some cases the leaders, of the delegations from political parties.

2. At outset, great honour that from the Antipodes you ask me to assist in these talks by taking the Chair.

I come with good wishes from both sides of my country's Parliament and with, I know, the earnest hopes of Australians for a successful outcome. So many Australians have very close links with Great Britain and very many with the island of Ireland. While these talks are of course primarily the concern of the six parties involved and those they represent, you will all know that there are on every continent of the globe men and women with links of blood and sentiment binding them to Ireland, North and South, who anxiously await their outcome.

3. All this makes the responsibility of each one of us here today a heavy one and I am acutely conscious of the responsibility involved in chairing Strand 2 of these talks, so long anticipated yet so long delayed, and now begun.

4. I regard my function as simply that of chairing meetings, whether plenary or in committee, my aim being to ensure, with the guidance of the Business Committee, on which all parties will be represented, that everything possible is done to assist you in your discussions and that no procedural obstacles are allowed to obstruct that aim; exclusively a facilitating role, in which I seek assistance from all of you.

I may from time to time make procedural suggestions and I accept responsibility for procedural arrangements; but procedure, like substance, is ultimately a matter for the parties. Please all of you feel not only free but welcome to express views and proffer suggestions on how best these meetings may be conducted, particularly bearing in mind the experience of many of you in Strand 1. Both I and GT will always hold ourselves available for that purpose.

5. I ask especially for your tolerance and understanding. Neutrality is a necessary virtue in a Chairman but it may also be something of a burden which you will all have to bear when it springs, as in my case, from a complete detachment in the past from the subject of these talks. If, in consequence, you sometimes find me unfamiliar with matters that to you are common knowledge, I ask for your patience.

6. The aim of the three strands of these talks has been described as the achieving of a new beginning for relationships within NI, within the island of Ireland and between the peoples of these islands. It is difficult to conceive of a more ambitious yet more imperative aim. If that aim can be achieved, generations yet unborn will look back on these talks as historic and on you all as architects of a new and better future for the communities of these two islands. You take up your work against the background of a deeply troubled past but in your hands lies the possibility of an infinitely brighter future.

7. The aim of Strand 2 is, of course, more specific. In the 26 March 1991 statements of both Governments it was described as focussing on the relationships among the people of the island of Ireland. Those statements stressed that it would be open to each of the parties to raise in these talks any aspect of those relationships, including constitutional issues, there being a need for wide-ranging dialogue where the full range of issues could be exhaustively explored. And it is also of the essence of these talks, and not to be ever lost sight of, that nothing will be finally agreed in any Strand until everything is agreed in the talks as a whole.

8. It seems to me, as a mere spectator of events to date, that we can approach Strand 2 with considerable, albeit guarded, optimism. I say this because, despite outstanding major differences in Strand 1, some elements

of agreement have nevertheless emerged concerning a desirable model for the future governance of NI. Coming as I do from an almost hundred-year-old federation of six states and a number of territories with nine governments and parliaments, six of them bicameral and all fiercely protective of their respective rights and interests, and having experienced some three decades of ongoing debate about models of constitutional change, it is as surprising as it is heartening to find that agreement does exist on important elements.

9. The possible agenda for Strand 2, if it is agreed today and becomes our agenda for this Strand, conforms to the statements of Governments of 26 March 1991 in that it would provide wide-ranging dialogue on the issues relevant to this Strand. My hope is that such dialogue will assist in reducing to an agreed text whatever areas there are of substantial agreement between the parties. We could then move from there to the margins of agreement, extending the scope of agreement until areas of unequivocal disagreement are defined. Then the task may prove to be one of finding ways around those areas. All this will obviously involve a deal of work, much of it probably best done in small working groups.

10. To an extent the ground rules for this Strand are already laid down in the Procedural Guidelines assented to by all the parties and which I, of course, will observe. Consistently with those Guidelines you can be

assured that I will make no public statement or announcement about these talks, whether regarding substance or process, without the prior agreement of each delegation. Likewise I ask all parties to observe complete confidentiality as a prime necessity for any worthwhile outcome of these talks. The only exception to this will be the making available to the media after each day of meetings of a very brief official statement; the form of such statements, which would follow the pattern established in Strand 1, will, of course, have to be agreed with all parties.

11. The business for today consists of a report which the Secretary of State, Sir Patrick Mayhew, has been good enough to agree to give, covering the proceedings in Strand 1 to date. Now that both the Irish Government and I have been supplied with relevant documents emerging from Strand 1, I understand from Sir Patrick that he feels his report can be relatively brief. Then will follow the adoption of an agenda for Strand 2, which may or may not take up much time. So it is possible we may complete the day's work quite early in the afternoon. In that event, and if, but only if, the parties agree, it would be possible to use the valuable time remaining by beginning today the making of opening presentations, otherwise scheduled for tomorrow. Depending on factors of time, one opening statement may be sufficient and the Alliance Party, which would lead the presentations, has been good enough to say they would be prepared to make

their presentation this afternoon if time permits, and all parties agree. The advantage of making a start today with opening presentations would be that it should give more time at the end of tomorrow's proceedings for delegations to consider the substance of the various presentations and what should be their responses to them. It is really a question of when time out of session will be most useful, this afternoon or tomorrow after all the presentations have been made.

12. I would hope that presentations by the parties can be confined to the outlining by each of their expectations for the outcome of talks in this Strand. It will be helpful if, at this opening stage, the presentations are essentially positive, confined to what each party would wish to see by way of outcome, rather than any critical analysis of the proposals of others. Such critical analyses I envisage being made on Wednesday.

13. Because we are all very well aware that we are searching for outcomes acceptable to all, it will also be most helpful if presentations can be based on what is realistically achievable. The confidentiality of these proceedings should make it possible for discussion to be frank and open, without need to weigh each word as it might appear if reported, out of context, in the media. This is, of course, what makes it so vital that

confidentiality be maintained throughout not only these three days but throughout the whole of this Strand.

After each party has made its presentation, the parties, having considered what has been said by others and their reactions to it, will on Wednesday have the opportunity to express those reactions, speaking in reverse order to that in which the initial presentations were made. This will be the appropriate occasion for critical analysis of what others have put forward.

14. It would not seem productive in this three day plenary session to then have further debate by way of answers made to these responses. By restricting discussions to presentations and responses attitudes will have been identified and issues defined. Of course, if there are ambiguities to be resolved in a presentation or response, parties should feel free to ask questions, doing so after all parties have made their presentations or responses, as the case may be.

15. What follows, when we resume Strand 2 after this three day plenary will very much depend upon the shape of discussion up to that stage. I suspect that it will be necessary to begin with a, perhaps quite brief, plenary session to decide the order of work and the subjects usefully to be referred to working groups. Then, having set up working groups, at each of which all parties will be represented, each group can work through its allotted

subject matter and report back, identifying areas of agreement and defining points of disagreement. I would contemplate chairing each of these working groups, none of them being held simultaneously. The smaller these groups, it seems to me, the better. My own preference, if that were agreeable to the parties, would be for working groups to consist of one representative from each party, six in all. But all this will, of course, be for discussion in the Business Committee and for consensus decision.

16. There should, I think, be full opportunity for any party at any time, whether in plenary or in working group, to call for an adjournment of sufficient length to permit full consultation and deliberation. No party should ever be in a position of feeling that it is in any way being pressured into doubtful assent to any proposition.

17. Although this does not appear on the possible agenda, it would seem sensible on the conclusion of responses on Wednesday to have a short discussion regarding further talks as well as attending to the appointment of the Business Committee. We will need to determine the dates, location, duration and format of the next phase of meetings and also, for the longer term, find out what are the wishes of the parties regarding timetables for the balance of July and thereafter.

Perhaps you might give some thought to these matters in the meanwhile.

18. Before we move on to the Report on Strand 1, I understand the Secretary of State, Sir Patrick Mayhew, and the Tanaiste, Mr Wilson, wish to make an announcement - Sir Patrick!.