

OPENING STATEMENT MADE BY SECRETARY OF STATE: 17 JUNE 1991

1. Welcome. There has been an unforeseen delay since the opening bilaterals of this strand of discussion in reaching the point of sitting together around this table and I am delighted that we now all are.

2. However, during that interval we have together faced up to a number of major procedural issues and I believe it is for the long-term benefit of these talks that we have now largely resolved those potential problems.

3. In particular, I am delighted that following consultation with the parties represented here and with the approval of the Australian Government, the way is now clear for the Government and the Government of the Republic of Ireland to proceed with the appointment of Sir Ninian Stephen as the Chairman for the second strand of these Talks. It was not easy to identify what was the appropriate blend of characteristics which any Chairman for strand two should ideally have, but I believe that in Sir Ninian we have secured a Chairman who comes as close as anyone could reasonably expect to meeting all the high but differing standards of perfection which have been set. It was with great satisfaction that I heard that he was in principle willing to assume this role and I believe we will all have cause to be grateful to him for the way in which it will be discharged.

4. Proceeding by way of bilateral exchanges, as we have been forced to do until now, has had the disadvantage of causing long intervals to elapse during which individual delegations may have had little to do. I trust that we can now proceed in a brisker and less stilted manner.

5. There are however two points arising from the last few weeks which I should like to make.

6. First, I at least have had the opportunity to hear from each of the parties something about their substantive positions. Despite the suspicions which some have entertained about others' motives I have to say that I have actually been strengthened in my belief that there is sufficient common ground between the parties to offer a real prospect of reaching a comprehensive political accommodation.

7. I have also had the opportunity to judge the commitment of each of the parties and the strength of their determination to make progress towards substantive exchanges. There has been a degree of nervousness around but it is clear to me that if any party had not been determined to get to the point of substantive plenary exchanges then we would indeed have failed to reach the point we have now reached.

8. I hope that on that note we can now look forward to an intensive programme of work, leaving the tensions of the past few weeks behind us.

9. I eschewed rhetorical flourishes at the earlier bilateral meetings but as we look ahead I believe it would be appropriate for me to mark this occasion by drawing attention to the nature of the opportunity which now lies before us.

10. You all have more direct experience than I do of the troubled history of Northern Ireland over the past 20 years, and indeed before that. You all appreciate the complexity of the issues which have given rise to those troubles and the passionate sincerity with which conflicting views are held by those in different parts of the community. You all know the horror, the tragedy and the waste which can occur when those views are transmuted and debased and become an excuse for murder and destruction.

11. As political representatives we have a duty to our respective constituencies to set Northern Ireland on a course which will lead away from division and conflict towards peace, stability and rapprochement.

12. There is of course one major uniting force at work. Both Governments - and indeed all the major Opposition Parties in both countries - and all the parties represented here today share a common determination to defeat terrorism. There is far more which unites us - against the enemies of constitutional political activity - than divides us and we should exploit that as a source of strength.

13. The talks on which we have now embarked offer us an historic opportunity. This is not simply because it is the first time since the Constitutional Convention that all the main political parties in Northern Ireland have sat down together in a formal setting to discuss the resolution of Northern Ireland's political problems. A number of other factors have contributed to the creation of this moment of opportunity.

14. First, the agenda of the process as a whole will be truly comprehensive and addresses all the relevant relationships. There are widely divergent views around this table about what should be the relationship between the two parts of Ireland and what machinery there should be for managing the relationship between the Governments of the United Kingdom and of the Republic of Ireland, especially in relation to Northern Ireland, but you all agree that the issues need to be addressed and that the outcome will affect any provisional understandings which may be reached on other matters.

15. Second, we are all agreed that at the appropriate moment representatives of the Government of the Republic of Ireland should join the talks process. This will enable us to explore, in the relevant strands of discussion, a range of issues affecting relationships among the people of the island of Ireland and between the two Governments. Those discussions could not sensibly take place in the absence of Irish Government representatives and their involvement will enable us effectively to tackle the whole range of issues which need to be addressed if we are to arrive at a comprehensive political accommodation.

16. Third, we are, I believe in a position to capitalise on a number of important shifts in public and political opinion, which should allow the various participants in the talks greater freedom of manoeuvre than may have been available to them before.

17. Finally - though this is perhaps not so much a new development as a continuing source of encouragement - there is as I mentioned earlier a strong sense of purposeful commitment among all the various participants: a real determination to achieve a settlement, accepting the need to accommodate the essential interests of the other participants. The necessary qualities of determination, realism and commitment have already been tested over the past year and a half and found to be available in no small measure on all sides. I am also very encouraged by the fact that the exercise of those qualities has received widespread public support which is further evidence, I believe, of the existence of a genuine opportunity to make real progress.

18. What can we make of this opportunity? As you know, I have no blueprint or hidden agenda. Within the various principles which the Government has consistently expressed, my aim will be to seek convergence, consensus and agreement. The precise shape of any outcome from the talks is something to which I am sure all here will contribute. My vision is that we can, together, construct a political accommodation from which all those who support constitutional political activity could gain. I believe there is a realistic prospect, given the commitment of which I spoke earlier and a considerable amount of hard work, of achieving solid gains for all the participants in the talks.

19. During our discussions in strand one we will be considering relationships within Northern Ireland, including the relationship between any new institutions here and the Westminster Parliament. We shall be considering whether it might be possible for substantial powers and responsibilities, currently exercised by me, supported by my Ministerial colleagues, to be exercised by locally elected representatives instead. As I have said in the past, the Government would be prepared to give serious consideration to any proposals for new arrangements in Northern Ireland, provided they were workable

and likely to prove stable and durable; would command widespread support; and would provide an appropriate and fair role for both sides of the community. It may be helpful for me to make clear that under the present constitutional legislation (which is not itself necessarily a limiting factor) it would be possible to transfer to local representatives legislative and executive responsibilities for a very wide range of matters.

20. How then should we exploit these opportunities? For my part I am pleased that all the parties have said that they favour a relatively informal style which will, in my view, make it easier to build understanding, confidence and trust as we tackle the agenda which lies before us.

21. I also believe it is a great strength of these talks that all concerned have said that they intend to present their positions frankly and candidly. This will require mutual trust and a strict adherence to our agreement that the talks should be confidential. But openness will clearly be necessary if we are to come to a full understanding of each others' positions. But if there is candour there will also need to be tolerance; at some stage, we are all likely to hear things which we would rather not hear - but unless we are open about the issues we will not be able to make progress in overcoming the problems. I hope that none of us will rush into any quick judgements or conclusions and that we will allow the issues to have a proper airing before we start to make firm pronouncements on each others' attitudes.

22. On a related point, it is inevitable that we shall - perhaps sooner, perhaps later - once more run up against what may appear to be major road blocks. Let us all recognise now that such situations will arise. In those circumstances I hope we can react as if presented with a challenge, rather than with a problem. I am confident that with the experience of the past year and a half and indeed the past few weeks to encourage us we will be able eventually to find ways round, through or over such apparent obstacles. Success may, however, be crucially dependent on restraining initial reactions, weighing our words carefully and taking care consciously to avoid painting ourselves into particular corners.

23. I think it would be helpful if I outline how I see my own role. You have all kindly accepted that I should be the Chairman for this stage in the process. In that role, there is of course the specific requirement placed on me, again outlined on 26 March, to make a judgement, after consultation, as to the appropriate moment to propose the launch of the next stage of these discussions. This is a decision which will weigh heavily on me and I will seek to discharge that function with great care.

24. I see my role as Chairman not only in terms of keeping order - which should of course be helped by the presence of so many respected Parliamentarians - but also as one of facilitating the process of dialogue. My own role in this process has been variously described as a facilitator or a sheepdog. I clearly command a number of resources - beyond an ability to provide conference facilities and to defray expenses - which I am keen to deploy to best advantage. I would, for example, be willing to arrange presentations on aspects of Government business or machinery if that would be helpful. I would also be very happy to table papers giving information on particular points and perhaps indicating in a neutral way the range of possible options for change.

25. I may also feel bound, on occasion, to draw attention to constraints which might not be welcome to one or more of the party delegations but which arise from wider Government interests, for example in relation to European Community matters, financial arrangements or the distribution of responsibilities for security matters. The Government is keen to be flexible in all such areas but we do have interests which will need to be identified as such. On such occasions in particular I may turn to Brian Mawhinney, the Minister of State, to explain any distinctive Government interest.

26. More positively, I do see it as part of my role in this process to highlight areas of convergence and, where possible, to lead the debate in a way which builds on those areas of agreement and approaches difficult issues in a careful and measured way. My ability to do this and perhaps, ultimately, to propose ways round some of the road blocks to which I referred earlier will depend

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crucially on my ability to gain a clear and detailed understanding of your respective positions.

27. I am confident that you will all, like me, be looking for ways to build on common themes which may emerge from the initial party presentations and the subsequent exchanges. I hope no-one will feel inhibited from putting forward suggestions which may help us all move forward. We are operating on a basis of confidentiality and also on the understanding that nothing can be agreed until everything is agreed. That may help us all to engage in lateral thinking. I certainly hope that anything put forward on this basis would be treated sympathetically as an honest effort to enable progress, and that delegations would give such contributions the benefit of careful consideration.

28. Finally and perhaps most important of all, I believe that all those whom we represent are looking to us to achieve convergence, accommodation and agreement. We all of course represent our separate and distinctive constituencies, but I am sure that the challenge to each of us is to represent those constituencies as vigorously as they would expect of us while, at the same time, seeking what is best for all the people. If I did not believe that the goodwill for such an ambitious goal existed, I would not have embarked at all on this process. That it does exist remains my fervent belief.