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NORTHERN IRELAND  
Information Service

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9 December 1994

EXPLORATORY DIALOGUE

OPENING STATEMENT BY THE GOVERNMENT

## Introduction

1. The Government's priority in Northern Ireland is to help achieve peace, stability, reconciliation and prosperity for all the people of Northern Ireland, and to establish locally accountable democratic institutions carrying widespread support and acceptance within a wider framework of harmonious relations based on consent.
2. For the last 25 years, all sections of the community have endured violence and immeasurable human suffering. They have overwhelmingly rejected such violence and supported the principles of democracy and consent, as set out in the Downing Street Declaration.
3. That Declaration offered a framework for a better future and set out a clear path by which Sinn Fein and others could come to play a full part in democratic life. There had first to be an assurance that violence was at an end. The IRA's announcement of 31 August, progressively confirmed in actions over the past three months, has made it possible for the Government to open this exploratory dialogue now as the next step in the process.
4. It is through this dialogue that peace can be consolidated and Sinn Fein can demonstrate its commitment to exclusively peaceful methods and the democratic process, and so take the opportunity offered by the Downing Street Declaration to enter fully into normal political life. It is therefore of critical importance. Senior Government officials, acting under Ministerial direction, are entering these exploratory discussions with the utmost seriousness and in a positive spirit with a commitment to bringing them, if possible, to a successful and satisfactory conclusion.



## Basis of Exploratory Dialogue

5. As the Government has already explained, it is entering this exploratory dialogue with the following purposes:

- to explore the basis upon which Sinn Fein would come to be admitted to an inclusive political talks process to which the British Government is committed but without anticipating the negotiations within that process;
- to exchange views on how Sinn Fein would be able over a period to play the same part as the current constitutional parties in the public life of Northern Ireland;
- to examine the practical consequences of the ending of violence.

6. As the British and Irish Governments reiterated in the Downing Street Declaration, the achievement of peace must involve a permanent end to the use of, or support for, paramilitary violence. The continuation and completion of this dialogue depends on the IRA's continued adherence to this in word and action, and on Sinn Fein demonstrating a commitment to exclusively peaceful methods and showing that they abide by the democratic process. One of the clearest demonstrations of adherence to these principles will be the safe removal and disposal of illegally-held weapons and explosives. Also important will be clarification of Sinn Fein's attitude to the use of violence for political purposes, and of its relationship to the IRA.

7. The Government recognises that Sinn Fein is supported by, and reflects the interests and aspirations of, a significant (though small) section of the population of Northern Ireland, and that this has been demonstrated through successive electoral mandates. The Government wishes Sinn Fein to play a full part in normal political life in accordance with its electoral mandate, but that will only be possible if, over the period of these exploratory discussions, the

Government and other political parties can come to be satisfied of Sinn Fein's abiding commitment in both word and deed to exclusively peaceful methods, and to the democratic process. In these circumstances, as far as the Government is concerned, Sinn Fein would be free to participate fully in democratic politics and join in due course in political dialogue between the British and Irish Governments and the political parties on the way ahead.

#### Principle of consent

8. The Government's fundamental approach to the future of Northern Ireland is based on the right of self-determination and the principle of democratic consent, as set out in paragraph 4 of the Downing Street Declaration. The Government reaffirms all its commitments in that Declaration, together with its obligations under international agreements and the guarantees which it has given, including Northern Ireland's statutory constitutional guarantee.

9. The Government welcomes the parallel commitments on behalf of the Irish Government to these principles in paragraph 5 of the Downing Street Declaration. It believes these principles have the support of people throughout both parts of the island of Ireland.

#### Political and social realities in Northern Ireland

10. In accordance with these principles, it is the present wish of a greater number of the people of Northern Ireland for Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom. Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom in domestic and international law. The Government is accordingly the lawful and democratically-constituted governing authority in Northern Ireland. There is also a set of geographical, historical and political realities which give the Government of the Republic of Ireland an interest in relevant Northern Ireland issues as acknowledged in the Anglo-Irish Agreement 1985.

11. Northern Ireland has a deeply divided community, characterised by traditions and identities which extend beyond Northern Ireland



itself to the rest of the island of Ireland and to the rest of the United Kingdom. Northern Ireland has suffered from an absence of agreement on political arrangements which would allow representatives from all main parts of the community to play a full and effective part in the political life of the region.

12. The larger part of the population of Northern Ireland retains a strong sense of loyalty to the Crown, believing that its culture and ethos can best be preserved if Northern Ireland remains part of the United Kingdom. The minority community, in general, sees itself as Irish. Politically, many in that community aspire to the achievement of a sovereign, territorially united Ireland.

13. The Government acknowledges a responsibility to all the people of Northern Ireland to provide security, stability and good government in general. It is committed to the establishment of a society in which all may live in peace, free from discrimination and intolerance, and with the opportunity for members of all sections of the community to participate fully in the structures and processes of government on the basis of parity of esteem.

14. So far as legislation and Government policies are concerned, most - if not all - sources of inequality between the two main parts of the community have now been removed. Intensive efforts have been and are being made to tackle the residual problems of inequality, and to target the areas of greatest social need, wherever they occur. But there remain substantial social and economic inequalities. These further exacerbate intercommunal divisions and reduce the extent to which certain parts of the minority community consider they are treated fairly in Northern Ireland. At the same time, there is evidence of alienation from Government in parts of the majority community on the grounds that the Government are alleged to pay insufficient concern to their legitimate interests and aspirations. These factors may also contribute to the readiness of small minorities, in different parts of the wider community, to resort to terrorism in pursuit of their political goals.

15. Terrorism in support of, and terrorism in opposition to, a change in the constitutional status of Northern Ireland has done great damage and inflicted immeasurable human suffering - although it has been steadfastly resisted by an overwhelming number of the people of Northern Ireland. More particularly, it has rendered the search for a just and lasting political settlement, as well as the achievement of economic prosperity, far more difficult. It has also made necessary the substantial commitment of the armed forces in support of the police.

16. The Government totally rejects any attempt to promote political objectives by violence or the threat of violence. It is absolutely committed to the achievement of political goals by exclusively peaceful and democratic means. But it also recognises that Northern Ireland's various community, security and social and economic problems tend to reinforce each other in a way which makes their solution, both individually and collectively, more difficult. Given this intimate and inseparable connection between Northern Ireland's political, security and economic and social problems, the Government recognises the need to tackle all these deep seated problems together.

17. The Government, upholding as it does the constitutional status of Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom this being the undoubted wish of most people who live there, also recognises a unique relationship between the peoples of the United Kingdom as a whole and of the Republic of Ireland. The Government is, therefore, firmly committed to the enhancement of that relationship and to continuing close contact, consultation and co-operation on matters of shared concern.

18. It also recognises that the history of these two islands is closely connected, with both uplifting and tragic episodes. No one has a monopoly on suffering. All sides have matters to regret. There is a need for a healing process through genuine reconciliation and dialogue between the various sections of the community, based on mutual recognition and acceptance of each other's rights.



## The aims of the British Government in Northern Ireland

19. It is against this background that the Government has been seeking to achieve the goal described in paragraph 1 above. More particularly, it is attempting to do so by:

- promoting the attainment of agreement amongst all the people who live in the island of Ireland, and working together with the Irish Government to that end;
- undertaking a co-ordinated and coherent approach to all aspects of Government policy in Northern Ireland, recognising that the fundamental political, security and economic and social problems of the region are closely interrelated; and
- pursuing policies informed by the principles of equality of opportunity, equity of treatment and parity of esteem irrespective of political, cultural or religious affiliation or gender.

20. The remainder of this statement sets out the more detailed implications of the preceding statements of the Government's objectives, and the principles and analysis on which they are based.

### Government policies - a summary

21. In respect of law and order, it will remain the Government's policy to:

- deal with all types of crime, including terrorist crime, by the vigorous and impartial enforcement of the criminal law by the police;
- secure the removal of all illegally-held guns and explosives;

- prevent any individual or organisation from usurping the functions of the police by taking the law into their own hands;
- move as rapidly as circumstances permit to exclusively civilian policing in ways acceptable to the whole community;
- continue to act imaginatively, in conjunction with the police and the armed forces and without lowering their guard prematurely, in its responses to the terrorist threat as and when that threat diminishes;
- maintain a secure but humane prison system in which convicted prisoners serve their sentences in accordance with the law.

22. In terms of social policy, the Government will continue to:

- seek to eliminate discrimination on the grounds of political opinion or religious belief in both the public and private sectors;
- secure the further protection of the human, civil, political, social and cultural rights of all members of the community in Northern Ireland;
- pursue action programmes targeted at the areas of greatest social and economic deprivation in Northern Ireland.

23. The Government's objectives in the field of economic policy include:

- the promotion of economic growth through increased competitiveness, from which it seeks both more jobs and a reduction in unemployment;



- a fair distribution of jobs throughout Northern Ireland;
- the provision of education and training facilities designed to maximise the welfare and life chances of members of all sections of the community; and,
- maximising the benefits to Northern Ireland of the UK's membership of the European Union.

24. The Government expects that exploratory dialogue will provide the opportunity, in terms of the purposes of the discussions set out in paragraph 5, to clarify and explain Government policy in any of the above areas with a view to helping bring the dialogue to a successful conclusion.

25. The Government expects, in particular, when discussing the practical consequences of ending violence, to examine at an early stage how all illegal weapons and explosives are going to be removed from life in Northern Ireland. Their safe disposal will provide convincing evidence of a permanent end to the use of violence and of commitment to exclusively peaceful methods and the democratic process. Their continued retention will call such commitments into question and will constitute a barrier to other political parties, as well as to the Government itself, in joining with Sinn Fein in substantive political negotiations.

#### The Talks Process

26. It remains the Government's belief that all the most fundamental issues facing Northern Ireland can be most satisfactorily addressed and resolved through inclusive political negotiations addressing a broad agenda across all the relevant relationships with no issue excluded and no outcome predetermined. It is to such a Talks Process that the Government hopes that it will prove possible for Sinn Fein, as a democratically mandated party exclusively committed to peaceful methods, to be admitted.

27. As paragraph 5 makes clear, the Government has said that exploratory dialogue should not anticipate any part of the negotiations that constitute the Talks Process. But, with a view to exploring the basis upon which Sinn Fein might come to be admitted to an inclusive Talks Process, the Government believes it would be helpful to set out its approach to it.

28. In brief, through the Talks process, the Government is seeking a stable, durable and workable political settlement which secures widespread consent across the community in Northern Ireland.

29. In the Talks process the two Governments are therefore, as announced in the House of Commons on 26 March 1991:

" .... setting out to achieve a new beginning for relationships within Northern Ireland, within the island of Ireland and between the peoples of these islands ... In order to ensure a full airing of the issues, it will be open to each of the parties to raise any aspect of these relationships, including constitutional issues, or any other matter which it considers relevant.... It is accepted by all the parties that nothing will be finally agreed in any strand until everything is agreed in the talks as a whole ... in the final analysis, the outcome will need to be acceptable to the people".

(Hansard 26 March 1991 Col 765-6)

30. Those "ground rules" remain the basis for the political talks, and were agreed between the British and Irish Governments and the main Northern Ireland constitutional parties in 1991. Even though the Government accepts that there might be modifications in the format of future multi-lateral talks, if that is what the participants want, the principles set out in the 26 March 1991 Statement remain so far unchallenged, and the Government in particular remains committed to them. In the view of the Government, the Downing Street Declaration also complements and underpins the Talks process and the search for a comprehensive political settlement.



31. Although agreement in principle had not been reached by the end of the period set aside for multi-lateral talks in November 1992, virtually all the key issues between the parties participating, including the Irish Government, had been touched on in greater or lesser detail, while the Talks process itself has continued ever since. Within Northern Ireland there have, for example, been intensive rounds of discussion between Northern Ireland Office Ministers and three of the main Northern Ireland parties to explore the basis for agreement.

32. Of equal importance to the continuing political dialogue in Northern Ireland has been the continuing work by the two Governments in drafting a "Joint Framework Document", designed to embody their shared understanding of the kind of accommodation, in those areas of special concern to both Governments, which might have the best chance of winning the widespread acceptance across the community that it will need if it is to be workable and durable. The British and Irish Governments hope to publish the Document, when complete, not as a blueprint to be imposed by the two Governments, but as a shared assessment to serve as a basis for further discussion.

33. The Joint Framework Document will deal with relations between the two Governments, and their views on the possible development of relations between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. As part of its search for an overall settlement, the Government also plans to publish, at the same time as the Joint Framework Document, its own understanding of those local democratic institutions in Northern Ireland which as part of an overall settlement might best secure widespread acceptance, as a basis for public discussion and a guide for further negotiation in the Talks Process.

34. Without in any way anticipating the negotiations that form part of the Talks process, the Government is prepared to explain and clarify its approach to the wider Talks process and how Sinn Fein can come to be admitted to it, as well as the relevance of the principles enshrined in the Downing Street Declaration.

Way Forward

35. The Government looks forward in this exploratory dialogue, not to the anticipation of political negotiations which would form part of the Talks process, but to a sustained and productive exploration of the issues, including those touched on above, all in the context of the purposes set out in paragraph 5.

36. The Government remains firmly of the view, also set out in the Downing Street Declaration, that this can be achieved in ways that compromise no position or principle, nor prejudice the future for any section of the people of Ireland, North and South, whatever their tradition.

9 December 1994