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NORTHERN IRELAND  
Information Service



7 February 1995

**EXPLORATORY DIALOGUE**

A further meeting between the Government and Sinn Fein was held today.

Sinn Fein repeated their view that the direct involvement of Ministers in the exploratory dialogue was essential to maintaining the momentum of the peace process and to addressing the key issues successfully in this dialogue. In response the Government side explained that Ministers would continue to review the progress of the dialogue meeting by meeting and would judge their own active participation on the basis of the progress that had been made and on whether their own involvement might assist in achieving the successful outcome they seek.

The discussion of possible ground rules for the inclusive talks process, which began at the meeting on 1 February, was continued on the basis of the attached paper tabled by the Government side setting out in some more detail its view on some issues concerning future multi-party talks, and Sinn Fein's response to it.

There was also a full and frank discussion of ways in which the causes of the conflict might be resolved and some of the practical consequences of the ending of violence including decommissioning of arms. Sinn Fein reaffirmed that they were a political party with an electoral mandate which had neither arms nor involvement in paramilitary activity. Sinn Fein repeated their view that all sides had influence and that, for their part, they would use such influence as they had, in their own way, positively to help create the environment in which all guns could be removed from Irish politics.

On this understanding the Government side made a number of points on the modalities of arms decommissioning. The Government side also acknowledged the relevance of other confidence building elements in respect of political issues, loyalist arms and security force measures and deployments. Sinn Fein emphasised the need to address the issue of demilitarisation across the board and in the context of steps towards a political settlement involving fundamental change.

The two sides confirmed that they would next meet on Thursday 9 February when Prisons issues would also be on the agenda. The Government side proposed further meetings at dates to be arranged, which Sinn Fein is to consider.

GROUND RULES FOR POLITICAL TALKS

PAPER BY THE NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE

General Principles

As the Government set out in the Joint Declaration (paragraph 4):

"Their primary interest is to see peace, stability and reconciliation established by agreement among all the people who inhabit the island, and they will work together with the Irish Government to achieve such an agreement, which will embrace the totality of relationships. The role of the British Government will be to encourage, facilitate and enable the achievement of such agreement over a period through a process of dialogue and co-operation based on full respect for the rights and identities of both traditions in Ireland."

2. The Government takes the view that a negotiated settlement leading to a lasting and durable political accommodation in Northern Ireland needs to be arrived at through inclusive dialogue involving the British and Irish Governments and democratically mandated parties which establish a commitment to exclusively peaceful methods and which have shown that they abide by the democratic process. It also considers that any such settlement must address not only political arrangements within Northern Ireland but also relationships within the island of Ireland (North/South) and the relationship between the two Governments (East/West). The agenda for discussion should be both comprehensive and open, enabling all participants to raise any issues they regard as relevant. Ultimately any overall outcome should be acceptable both to the participants and to the people.

### Previous Talks

3. These principles were reflected in the statement to the House of Commons on 26 March 1991 by the former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Mr Peter Brooke (copy attached) which set out the groundrules for the Talks process. That statement reflected agreement among the two Governments and four of the Northern Ireland parties and was the result of extensive, prolonged and detailed exploratory bilateral discussions, primarily between the British Government and the other participants.

4. The statement of 26 March 1991 recorded that all the participants agreed that they should seek a new beginning for relationships within Northern Ireland, within the island of Ireland and between the peoples of these islands (Strands I, II and III respectively) and that hope of achieving a new and more broadly-based agreement rested on finding a way to give adequate expression to the totality of these relationships. It also explained that it was open to each of the parties to raise any aspect of these relationships, including constitutional issues, or any other matter which it considered relevant. The statement also made it clear that all the parties accepted that nothing would be finally agreed in any one strand until everything was agreed in the Talks as a whole, and that confidentiality would be maintained.

5. The Strand I discussions are a matter for the Northern Ireland parties and the British Government; discussions on Strand II are for the two Governments and the Northern Ireland parties, while discussions in Strand III are for the two Governments but in liaison with the Northern Ireland parties. Since 26 March 1991 the Talks process has continued in different phases and formats. Two sets of multilateral talks were held in 1991 and 1992 but there have also been extensive and continuing bilateral discussions on substantive issues among the participants within the process. In 1991 the Talks began with discussions on Strand I and, under the arrangements agreed in the 26 March 1991 Statement, it was left to the Secretary of State to launch Strands II and III when, after consultation, he judged it appropriate. Strands II and III were duly launched in July 1992.

6. In addition to the 26 March 1991 Statement the Talks participants also agreed additional groundrules relating to the appointment of an independent chairman for Strand II and the venues for meetings in that strand, as well as liaison arrangements between the Northern Ireland parties and the two Governments on Strand III issues. A copy of these is attached.

7. Since the last round of multilateral Talks in 1992, political dialogue has continued in the form of exploratory bilateral discussions, held on a confidential basis, between Michael Ancram and the Alliance Party, SDLP and UUP. This dialogue is continuing. The two Governments have also remained in contact at all levels.

#### Basis for Future Multilateral Talks

8. The British and Irish Governments are currently engaged in drafting a Joint Framework Document intended to reflect a shared understanding of the elements of a settlement which might have the best chance of achieving widespread acceptance across the community. The Document is mainly concerned with Strands II and III. The Document is not a blueprint for a settlement which will be imposed, but is intended to provide a basis for further dialogue with the Northern Ireland parties to assist progress towards a negotiated settlement. Although the Document will represent the two Governments' shared understanding of the elements of a settlement the Northern Ireland parties will not be bound by its contents.

9. At the same time that the two Governments publish the Joint Framework Document, the British Government plans to publish its own ideas on local accountability in Northern Ireland (Strand I) so that the people can see the whole picture of what an overall settlement might look like.

10. This document will draw on the earlier discussions in the 1991 and 1992 Talks and on the Government's subsequent dialogue with the Northern Ireland parties. Again, these ideas will not be

imposed but are intended to stimulate further dialogue with the parties and to provide a possible basis for multilateral discussions. The Government has undertaken that the outcome from three stranded discussions will be put to a referendum.

11. Once the two documents are published, the Government will want to hear as wide a range of views as possible. It will be ready to explain and clarify the ideas in them. It will be interested to hear the views of Sinn Fein, as well as other political parties. This dialogue would offer Sinn Fein the opportunity both to seek explanation of the documents and to give the Government its views. Providing good progress continues to be made in this dialogue in addressing the full range of issues, Ministers will want to meet Sinn Fein as part of this dialogue in order to discuss these issues at first hand.

12. After publication of the two documents, the Government therefore envisages a series of bilateral and exploratory discussions with the relevant parties as to whether the documents provide a basis for multilateral discussions and what the groundrules might be. When the prospects appear good for the successful convening of multilateral talks on an inclusive basis, the Government would seek to convene such talks.

13. The groundrules for such talks would be for the participants to agree. For its part, the Government sees advantage in the discussions taking place on the basis of the same principles agreed in 1991, but the participants may wish to decide otherwise.

14. The Government would welcome Sinn Fein's views on the possible groundrules for political talks.

**NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE**  
3 February 1995