



An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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Political Talks

Possible Opening Remarks

- Both our Governments are strongly committed to political dialogue covering the three strands (internal Northern Ireland, North-South, Irish-British).
- We have an agreed basis in the statement of March 26th, negotiated after much hard work by our predecessors.
- I assume we both accept that statement and related understandings exactly as agreed by our predecessors, with the exception of the change we have discussed on the gap.
- As I said publicly, the gap should be long enough to permit serious negotiations, but not so long as to adversely affect the orderly implementation of the Agreement.
- I feel three months is ~~at~~ the correct limit, giving ample opportunity for negotiations, particularly as I would hope procedural wrangling will be kept to a minimum on this occasion.
- As regards an extension at the end, I believe that if the negotiations take off, all parties will cooperate to ensure that enough time is available to conclude them. Time will not be an obstacle in practice.
- However to announce an open-ended extension as of now might create the impression that the Government contemplated a long interruption in the work of the Conference and were thereby marginalising it. An open-ended gap might also tempt parties to "spin things out".
- In the interest of being helpful I can accept a short definite extension, at the request of all the parties in

Strand 2, to be available only in the context of serious negotiations.

- A point of crucial importance, as you know, is the timing of transition to Stage 2.
- The Unionists hoped to make "substantial progress" in Strand One a pre-condition for moving to Strand Two. This was not acceptable. The compromise was that the Secretary of State would judge the appropriate point "governed by the fact that all involved have agreed that the three sets of discussions will be under way within weeks of each other".
- We were given to understand and we still expect that this means four to five weeks into the gap.
- While I accept there can be no absolute guarantee, it is important to have your confirmation that this is also your goal and expectation, and that you will use your best endeavours to reach it.

Political Talks

Background Note

History

1. Since early 1990, efforts have been made to launch political talks between the Irish and British Governments and the constitutional political parties in Northern Ireland.

2. Initially, these efforts concentrated on ways of addressing the Unionist preconditions for participation in dialogue (i.e., a readiness on the part of the two Governments to contemplate an alternative Agreement; suspension of the present Agreement and the Secretariat). Agreement was eventually reached on a formula under which the two Governments gave public indications of their readiness to contemplate an alternative Agreement; a "natural gap" between two Conference meetings could be utilised for talks; and, in the absence of Conference meetings, the formal role of servicing the latter which is assigned to the Secretariat under the Agreement would be deemed to lapse for the period concerned.

3. The terms of an agreed basis for talks were announced by the then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in Parliament on 26 March 1991. The purpose of the talks was to "achieve a new beginning for relationships within Northern Ireland, within the island of Ireland and between the peoples of these islands". The talks would be organised in three 'strands' corresponding respectively to these three relationships. All three strands would be launched "within weeks of each other". It would be open to each of the parties to raise any aspect of the three relationships including constitutional

issues, or any other matter which it considered relevant. Nothing would be finally agreed in any strand until everything was agreed in the talks as a whole. The outcome of the talks would need to be acceptable to the people.

4. After a delay caused by disagreements over issues such as venues and the choice of a Chairman for Strand Two, substantive talks in Strand One took place for a period of three weeks last summer. The parties exchanged analyses of the underlying problems and realities and some common ground was identified. On 3 July, however, they were brought to an end as a result of Unionist insistence that, because of the short time remaining within the period which had been agreed for talks (30 April - 16 July), the Conference meeting scheduled for 16 July should not go ahead.

5. Efforts were made over the December/January period to revive the process but were frustrated by the Unionist leaders' determination to reserve their position on a continuation of talks after the British election in the event of a Labour Government coming to power.

6. However, following a meeting between the party leaders and the Prime Minister on 11 February, it was announced that the parties would meet to see whether obstacles in the way of fresh political dialogue could be overcome. On the occasion of their meeting in London on 26 February, the Taoiseach and the Prime Minister underlined their wish to see the talks process continue as soon as possible and be carried through to a successful conclusion. Remarks made by Neil Kinnock after his meeting with the Taoiseach on the following day provided a face-saver for the Unionists in relation to the continuation of talks under a possible Labour administration.

7. These developments led to a statement by the party leaders that they saw no obstacle to the resumption of talks as soon

as possible. At the Conference on 6 March, the two Governments agreed that, in order to facilitate talks, there would be no further Conference meeting until after the British general election had been called. At that point the talks would cease. A Conference would be held very shortly after the election and that Conference would decide, taking account of discussions in the meantime with the party leaders, a further interval between Conference meetings to facilitate talks.

8. This scenario was observed. On 9 March, Strand One discussions resumed with a brief plenary session in Stormont followed by a meeting of a Business Committee. The discussions, whose object was essentially to prepare the ground for post-election talks, were then adjourned. On the following day, as expected, the Prime Minister called the election for 9 April. The return of a Conservative Government with a clear majority in that election removed the threat posed to resumed talks by the prospect of Unionist exploitation of a "hung Parliament" outcome.

9. On 1 April, shortly before the election, Secretary of State Brooke wrote to the Minister to ask whether agreement could be reached between the two Governments at that stage on the nature of the new gap. He suggested a gap from 23-24 April to the end of July, with an indication to be given to the parties of a readiness to contemplate an extension "in the right circumstances". In reply, the Minister said he shared the British desire to ensure a reasonable interval for serious negotiations but was also conscious of nationalist wariness about abnormally long intervals which could be construed as a surrender to Unionist tactics. He underlined the importance of finding a formula which would balance the practical requirements with the need to avoid anything which might add to the concerns he had mentioned.

10. In his initial phone contact with the Minister, the new Secretary of State reiterated his predecessor's proposal on the gap. The Minister replied that he wished to consult with his Government colleagues before giving a definite response. Subsequent exchanges through the Secretariat underlined the Minister's concerns in relation to a possible extension of the gap. The matter was resolved, however, in a phone conversation between the Minister and the Secretary of State on 24 April. It is agreed that Monday's Conference will announce a three-month gap, running until a date in the week beginning 27 July, and that provision will be made for a very limited extension of this gap, in the light of progress made and on the basis of a unanimous request by the parties. The Minister has made clear his preference that the latter provision should not be disclosed to the parties.

11. Satisfaction has also been obtained on a point of fundamental importance, the timing of the transition to Strand Two. The Minister told the Secretary of State in their conversation on 24 April that he wished to see this happen within 4-5 weeks, as had been envisaged between the two Governments last year. The Secretary of State, who had earlier indicated a possible timescale of up to nine or ten weeks before the transition occurred, expressed the hope that Strand Two could be brought on "earlier rather than later". Indicating his concern not to put any gloss on the 26 March statement, he suggested that the indication of 4-5 weeks given to the former Minister had been a "hopeful expectation" rather than a guarantee. However, he gave a personal assurance to the Minister that he wanted to "get it done as quickly as possible" and commented that "everything points towards it really, if it can be achieved".

12. It is agreed that the Secretary of State will write to the party leaders to say that he is confident that there will be agreement between the two Governments on Monday on a

sufficient gap and that he wishes, accordingly, to invite them to talks on Wednesday (29 April). The letters will refer neither to the details of the gap nor to the transition from Strand One to Strand Two.

13. Assurances have also been sought from the British side that the various understandings which applied at the time of the last talks (on the role of the Secretariat during the gap, etc) will again apply on this occasion.

Arrangements for the talks

14. The following are the key arrangements which will apply during resumed talks.

15. The Strand One talks will take place, under the Secretary of State's chairmanship, in Parliament Buildings at Stormont, though there is also provision for meetings in London. There will be delegations of ten (three at the table at any one time, four behind and three elsewhere in the building). The talks will normally take place on Monday-Wednesday inclusive each week. A Business Committee has been established which will report to plenary. The plenary may appoint sub-committees on particular topics.

16. It is expected that the Liaison Group of officials, through which the Government was briefed on last year's Strand One talks, will be reconstituted. The Department will also be stationing an official in Belfast to maintain daily liaison with the SDLP, assist them with drafting and furnish detailed reports to Dublin based on the SDLP's own notes of the proceedings. There will also be other contact with senior SDLP figures throughout the period of the talks.

17. It is likely that discussions in Strand One will resume on the basis of a British paper summarising the "requirements"

of each party (in relation to structures in the North) as articulated during last year's talks.

18. Media arrangements will be on the lines of those observed last year - access to participants will again be restricted. (Though the Unionists have been the most vocal in demanding the exclusion of the media, they were in fact the worst offenders last year in terms of contact with the latter).

19. The Strand Two discussions will be chaired by an independent Chairman, Sir Ninian Stephen (a distinguished former Governor-General of Australia). Sir Ninian, whose selection was contested for several months by the DUP, will act in accordance with Rules of Procedure agreed last year between the two Governments. The Strand Two talks will open with a meeting in London (precise venue, duration and other arrangements yet to be determined), proceed to Northern Ireland for the bulk of substantive negotiations (precise venue, etc. yet to be determined) and move to Dublin (again, precise arrangements yet to be determined) for a concluding meeting.

20. Arrangements for Strand Three have not yet been considered in detail.

Anglo-Irish Division

74 April 1992