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FROM FOX FOR COI RADIO TECHNICAL SERVICES

TRANSCRIPT OF PRESS CONFERENCE

GIVEN BY THE PRIME MINISTER, MR JOHN MAJOR,

IN BELFAST

ON WEDNESDAY, 22 FEBRUARY 1995

PRIME MINISTER:

Let me say a few words to you about the Strand 1 document, the internal proposals for Northern Ireland. Over the past few months normal life has been returning here in Northern Ireland, I think that is apparent to people in a range of ways, they are feeling the benefits of peace, they can see them in security for their families, in freedom to travel, and in the rapid improvement that we are seeing in the Northern Ireland economy. But normality must mean other things as well, it must also mean a return to normal political life and what I would like to do now is to talk to you about the British government's proposals for new democratic arrangements within Northern Ireland.

The document that we are publishing this morning has two objectives. First, to re-invigorate local democracy. For the last 22 years Northern Ireland has been without an effective Assembly, local government representatives have enjoyed only very limited powers. And save for those who have been elected either to Westminster or to Strasbourg, Northern Ireland's political

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Leaders have had few opportunities to exercise power and to bear the responsibilities of public service. Our proposals this morning seek to restore democratic accountability and to restore responsiveness to local needs in a way that meets the unique traditions and circumstances of Northern Ireland. The second objective is to contribute to an overall political settlement. To be effective the Assembly must attract wide participation, it must enjoy the confidence of both of the main parts of the Northern Ireland community and its best chance of achieving that is as part of a balanced three strand agreement. The Assembly will have a vital part to play, not only within Northern Ireland, but in managing and giving authority to new north/south institutions. Northern Ireland's representatives in a north/south body of course would be drawn from the Assembly and would be answerable to the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Our proposals this morning will not surprise the parties to the talks process because they stem from our discussions with them in 1991 and 1992 and subsequently. The proposals centre around an Assembly of about 90 members. To meet Northern Ireland's particular needs it would be elected by a form of proportional representation, the Assembly would discharge legislative and executive responsibilities across Northern Ireland but it would not have tax-raising powers.

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We propose a committee system which would broadly reflect the strength of parties in the Assembly, the committees would oversee the work of the Northern Ireland departments. The Chairmen of those committees would become heads of department, taking over many of the responsibilities now exercised by the Ministers of State and the Parliamentary Under-Secretaries at the Northern Ireland Office. An additional proposal would be to establish a separate directly elected panel, probably of 3 senior people, to carry out representational, consultative and monitoring functions.

The effect of these proposals would be to distribute responsibilities fairly between the parties according to their electoral strengths and to give their senior representatives significant roles. For example, responsibility in the local management of health, education, housing or agriculture would be put back in the hands of Northern Ireland representatives. The United Kingdom government would continue to direct police and security matters, at least for so long as the army is required to act in support of the police.

I believe that our proposals should reflect the province's unique character. An assembly with significant powers where responsibility was shared fairly between the parties would help to heal divisions.

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Both sets of our proposals are now in the public domain and we shall now allow a period for debate and for discussion. I hope the people of Northern Ireland will take time to look closely at our ideas and then let us and their elected representatives have their views after that consideration and study.

I am not setting a timetable for public consultation. When there has been time for opinions to crystallize, to mature, we will invite the political parties to consultations, we shall decide with them the best way of moving forward. Some parties have already made their own proposals and I am sure there will be many more suggestions to come. We will welcome constructive contributions from all quarters.

We have set out what we believe to be a realistic framework for a lasting settlement, but the crucial task will be to reach an agreed outcome in talks with the political parties and then to secure the consent of the people of Northern Ireland in a referendum.

For the last 25 years terrorism, sectarian violence in Northern Ireland, have tested people's resilience and courage sometimes to the utmost. I hope the people of Northern Ireland will never again have to face that challenge. What I have described this morning is a challenge of a different kind, the challenge of living in peace, of healing divisions and of sharing responsibilities.

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To a community which has endured such remarkable strains over the past quarter of a century that too is difficult, it will pose acute questions and it will demand hard decisions. But it is a challenge of hope and it offers the prize of greater peace and stability than Northern Ireland perhaps has ever known in its long history.

I simply this morning ask people to put aside old fears and to be open to the opportunities that now lie ahead of them. We have set out those opportunities in the documents before people, let them consider them, decide upon them, reflect upon them, and let us have their views in the weeks and months that lie ahead.

QUESTION:

... but can you really take the process forward, let alone understand it, if these people, Mr Paisley etc, say that the ... is too high and we will not participate?

PRIME MINISTER:

The whole thrust of what I have been saying this morning is that we need to carry both the parties and the people with us. You say there has been a lot of talk about appealing over the heads of the parties to the people, not by me there has not, that may have been what some people have written but I am engaged, and have been engaged, in discussions with the parties, I hope to be engaged in discussions with the parties and I think the people themselves have a right to know what is in detail in our proposals, that is

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why we are making that available to people, that is why I have said we will have a referendum. But the question is, we need to continue our discussions with the parties and that is what we are going to do, we need to persuade, we need to bring them together so they can bring forward their ideas. They too will want to consult with their constituents. We are not engaged in anything other than a dialogue that seeks to embrace as many people as possible so that all those ideas can come forward and of course we want the ideas of the political parties, that is what we have been discussing with them for the past four years. I would like to sit down with the political parties as soon as possible, let them look at this, let them reflect on this. Nobody is trying to cut the political parties out of the process, as I said in the earlier press conference, we need to persuade, we need to bring them with us, and that is the business that I am engaged in.

QUESTION:

Is it the case that there will be no assembly in Northern Ireland until there is agreement on the other documents, ... earlier talks that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed?

PRIME MINISTER:

The answer is yes, they are all of a piece.

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QUESTION:

Is it true that if you have an Assembly and the Unionists refuse to participate in the north/south body ... if they refuse that you can in some way force them to?

PRIME MINISTER:

Let me deal with that matter and let me draw perhaps an analogy that will put this particular matter in context. In the United Kingdom government I have a number of Ministers of State and Parliamentary Secretaries. Part of their responsibilities is to attend the European Community committees and represent the United Kingdom government there, that if you like is a duty of service, part of their job as Ministers. No-one is providing onerous sanctions on the heads of the Assembly committees to attend, we are saying these committees will be established firstly only after discussion with the parties; secondly, only after a referendum; thirdly, only after the Parliamentary legislation; fourthly, after the establishment of the Assembly; fifthly, after election of the Assembly; sixthly, after the appointment of the chairmen, the departmental heads from within the Assembly, and then we are asking the departmental heads to play their democratic role in representing the Assembly, being answerable to the Assembly in the north/south bodies. That is exactly the same duty of service that my Ministers have in going to the European Union and representing the views of the United Kingdom. It is not some onerous harsh task that is laid upon them where they are taken away in chains and condemned to go and sit down in the north/south Assembly, that

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is, to put it modestly, something of a misrepresentation that has got about over recent weeks.

QUESTION (RTE News):

How important do you view the role of the three person panel that you have provided for, is that an essential component of these proposals?

PRIME MINISTER:

No, I cannot say it is essential. It has been suggested by more than one political party now, not all of them but by more than one, it is not essential but I think many people see it as an attractive option to ensure fair play. What we see as perhaps the position of the three senior people who would be this panel, they would perhaps have a role in the selection of Heads of Departments with the Assembly, they perhaps would have a role in discussions on public appointments, they would perhaps have a role in scrutinising some of the particularly controversial legislation. That and other issues would need to be discussed with the political parties as to what their role is. But if you wanted to crystallise it I suppose they are there to ensure fair play. But the Assembly could operate without them if the political parties decided in discussion that they did not want the panel, that would not abort the proposals, they are something that is seen as a useful addition to the Assembly but they are not of necessity a part of the package that would necessarily need to be there for the rest of the package to work.

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QUESTION:

In Paragraph 10, the Northern Ireland Secretary of State would still have responsibility for ... does that mean that this is potentially an assembly with no substantial authority, or do you see this assembly as ...?

PRIME MINISTER:

I think you put two extremes and I do not see it, with respect, in either of those extremes. You started off by talking about the law and order responsibilities. The British Army have been in Northern Ireland for a long time, they will stay there for as long as it is necessary to protect the people of Northern Ireland, nobody should be in a shred of doubt about that. Certainly for so long as the British Army are there I cannot conceive the British government devolving to any extent the law and order responsibilities that legitimately are theirs at the moment. At some stage in the future, and it is certainly not in the imminent future, if the Assembly wish to take more powers for law and order that would certainly be something we could discuss with them, but that would be a matter for the Northern Ireland Assembly to discuss with the British government of the day and make decisions about that.

As far as the status of the assembly is concerned, it is going to have significant legislative responsibilities, it will pass its own legislation, it will within its own block vote seek to determine what legislation it wishes to pass, so it is going to

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have significant responsibilities but it is not going to have tax-raising powers.

And it is a unique proposition. We have in Northern Ireland a different circumstance than applies anywhere else in the United Kingdom for historical reasons and for a range of other reasons as well, and it is to seek to respond directly to the unique traditions and history of Northern Ireland that we propose an assembly of this sort. So neither dominion assembly nor assembly without powers, it lies in the middle of that with legislative powers and executive powers of significance, but it is not a tax-raising assembly.

QUESTION:

Inaudible.

PRIME MINISTER:

Political representatives, it is the political representatives of the paramilitaries.

QUESTION:

Inaudible.

PRIME MINISTER:

We have only launched the framework document this morning, we must wait and see what people's more mature views are. I had the opportunity of briefing the DUP yesterday, last evening, though

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some members of the DUP had expressed views prior to the briefing. But I had the opportunity of briefing them last night, the document is now in public, they will no doubt wish to consider and reflect upon it over a period. I think that is the only way we are going to get considered views. Snatching at views today by anyone, whichever view they may hold, whether it is absolutely right or not, it is a complex document in many ways and it will bear study and it will bear consideration. It will then bear discussion with Northern Ireland Ministers to clarify points where they are open to misunderstanding, we have seen some misunderstandings over recent weeks following leaks in various places of what was in the document. That is what I expect to happen next and I think that will bring people closer to a mature view of what this document is about and what it seeks to achieve.

(END OF TRANSCRIPT A, CONTINUED ON TRANSCRIPT B)