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FROM: D BROOKER
TALKS SECRETARIAT
14 JUNE 1991

I should like to turn now to the issue of developments on the political front over the past twelve months. The House will be aware I have been continuing bilateral discussions with the four main constitutional parties in Northern Ireland, the Irish Government, along lines that will be set out in the speech.

I explained, when introducing the Bill, that there were a number of reasons why it was necessary to continue the drive for political progress in Northern Ireland. Foremost amongst these reasons is that however effective and successful the Direct Rule arrangements are, they do not deal with the other matters which would otherwise be the responsibility of regional political institutions and dealt with - by virtue of the predecessors to this Order - under the direction and control of central Government, mean that local politicians are denied the full range of responsibilities which are available to them. In the absence of a regional forum, locally elected representatives are disadvantaged in that they have little scope to influence the decisions of Government or to assume responsibility for activities in a way which is familiar or politically desirable in the UK.

- cc. PS/PUS (L&B) - B
- PS/Mr Fell - B
- Mr Pilling - B
- Mr Thomas - B
- Mr Alston - B
- Mr Dodds - B
- Mr D J R Hill - B
- Mr Cooke - B
- Mr McNeill - B
- Mr Archer, RID, FCO - B
- Mr Gowan, Cabinet Office - B
- HMA Dublin - B

MR DURBIN

John Stamps

TALKS: DIRECT RULE RENEWAL

I enclose a draft input for the Secretary of State's speech next Thursday, 20 June, introducing the Direct Rule Renewal Debate. I have also revised the supplementary material provided for the Secretary of State for yesterday's "TOPS" and this is also attached. The material will, of course, need to be reviewed nearer the time in the light of intervening events.

Signed:

D BROOKER
Talks Secretariat
14 June 1991

CP/CPL1/11296

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT

1. I should like to turn now to the issue of developments on the political front over the past twelve months. As the House will be aware I have been continuing bilateral exchanges with the four main constitutional parties in Northern Ireland, and the Irish Government, along lines that will be familiar to the House.
2. I explained, when introducing the current Order twelve months ago, that there were a number of reasons why it was important to continue the drive for political progress in Northern Ireland. Foremost amongst those reasons is that however effective and efficient direct rule is perceived to be, it fails to address the central issue of providing locally elected political representatives with a proper say in the administration of the Province's affairs. The present arrangements, under which local government in Northern Ireland has only limited powers, and other matters which would otherwise be the responsibility of regional political institutions are dealt with - by virtue of the predecessors to this Order - under the direction and control of central Government, mean that local politicians are denied the full range of responsibilities which would otherwise be available to them. In the absence of a regional political forum, locally elected representatives are disadvantaged in that they have little scope to influence the decisions of Government or to assume responsibility for activities in a way which is familiar to politicians elsewhere in the UK.

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A further key factor which must be uppermost in our minds is that the prospect of stable government in Northern Ireland, founded on cross-community support must in itself provide the best possible lead for others in the community, in terms of bringing about reconciliation between the different traditions - reconciliation which can only be good for all the people of Northern Ireland. It would also bring home in a way which cannot be achieved under the present arrangements the total redundancy of the terrorist in Northern Ireland. I should be surprised if anyone associated with the political process in Northern Ireland would claim that a political accommodation between the two sides of the community in Northern Ireland and between the people of the island of Ireland would, in itself, extinguish the problems of terrorism but I believe they would agree that a settlement would deal the terrorists a very serious blow. Many people recognise this in Northern Ireland and beyond and I am sure that it accounts for a not inconsiderable proportion of the support which has been given to the current political talks from all walks of life.

4. When we considered the equivalent order last year I explained to the House that, having been engaged in bilateral discussions with the four Northern Ireland parties and the Irish Government for some six to nine months prior to that date, I believed a basis for Talks had been identified. I was not then in a position to announce the date when Talks might start, however, because certain issues remained to be resolved. After a pause during the summer holiday period I then resumed discussions with the other participants; these ran on through the Autumn and into the New Year. Eventually, on 26

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March, I was able to announce to this House, in an oral statement, that final agreement had been reached on a basis for Talks involving the four Northern Ireland parties and the two Governments. I paid tribute in that statement to the flexibility and commitment which all participants had shown in allowing us to arrive at that position and I do so again today. It is a testimony to all the participants' commitment and determination that we have achieved a situation where round-table Talks are now under way. This is the first time in fifteen years, since the Constitutional Convention met in 1976, that the four main Constitutional parties in Northern Ireland have come together around the same table to discuss their common future.

5. It may be helpful to the House if I remind honorable members of the basis on which the Talks are proceeding, as set out in my statement of 26 March. First of all, it is accepted that discussions must focus on three main sets of relationships: those within Northern Ireland, including the relationship between any new institutions there and the Westminster Parliament; those between the people of the island of Ireland; and those between the two Governments. It is common ground between all the parties that the hope of achieving a new and more broadly based agreement rests on finding a way to give adequate expression to the totality of these relationships.

6. Talks will accordingly take place in three strands corresponding respectively to those three sets of relationships. The first strand, which is under way, involves substantive Talks between the parties in Northern Ireland under my chairmanship. I

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so have the responsibility of judging, after consultation, when the moment has come formally to propose the launch of the later strands of discussion, involving the Irish Government. All involved have agreed that the three sets of discussions, which will start at different times but run concurrently, will be under way within weeks of each other.

7. It is fundamental to the nature of Talks that, in order to ensure a full airing of the issues, each of the parties will be able to raise any aspect of the various relationships including constitutional issues, or any other issues which it considers relevant. The whole arrangement is also underpinned by an agreement that nothing will be finally agreed in any one strand until everything is agreed in the Talks as a whole.

8. It is against that background, Mr Speaker, that plenary discussions began in Belfast on Monday of this week. As honorable members will be aware, it had been my hope that plenary discussions might have started some weeks earlier, after an initial round of bilaterals at the end of April, but that did not prove possible. There were a number of important procedural issues which needed to be resolved first. Bilateral exchanges therefore outlined up to Wednesday 5 June. I am pleased to report that during that period useful progress was made because we were able to agree the details of a workplan to strand one, the venues for discussions in strand two, a set of procedural guidelines for the conduct of strand two and a separate paper on staffing support for the independent chairman in that strand. [The appointment of the independent

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chairman remains under active consideration]. Although this initial phase lasted some time, because it raised important issues of principle for the participants, I do not believe that the overall process suffered unduly because of it and I am glad that Round Table discussions are now firmly launched.

9. I have learnt, in the course of this process, that it is rarely productive to look too far ahead. Clearly, however, it would now be optimistic to believe that all the issues could be considered and dealt with in the ten week period initially ear marked for the Talks, which runs out in the early part of next month. That is an issue which the participants will have to address before the ten week period comes to an end. In the meantime, however, our first priority is to press ahead to make as much progress as possible in the weeks that remain. For its part, the Government will continue in its efforts to establish consensus. We will do so by seeking to ensure that the constitutional rights of both sides of the community continue to be protected. We will also be prepared to give serious consideration to any proposals which might emerge from the Talks which would involve new political arrangements in Northern Ireland, provided they were workable, stable and durable, would command widespread support and provide an appropriate and fair role for both sides of the community. With the Irish Government we have also made it clear that we would be prepared to consider a new and more broadly based agreement or structure between our two Governments if such an arrangement can be arrived at through direct discussion and negotiation between all the parties concerned.

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10. Mr Speaker, we are still in the relatively early stages of the Talks process even though it can trace its origins back to the early part of last year. Our aim is to seek to find new and different ways of governing the Province of Northern Ireland and of securing arrangements between a new administration in Northern Ireland the Government of the Republic and the peoples of the island of Ireland and I hope that we will continue to make progress in that direction. In the meantime, the business of Government must necessarily proceed on its present constitutional footing and the order before the House for approval today therefore remains essential.

MR PILLING - 8

TALKS STEERING GROUP

Please find attached the minutes of the sixth meeting of the Talks Steering Group which took place on 2 June 1971.

Signed: Jonathan W. Smith

J W SMITH
 Constitutional and Political Secretary
 13 June 1971
 CW 548 6535