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SECRETARY OF STATE'S STATEMENT AS DELIVERED TO STRAND II COMMITTEE,  
18 SEPTEMBER 1992

1. It is sometimes convenient for a politician to quote himself. More often it is convenient for his opponents to quote him. Today I am presented with the first kind of occasion.

"We are concerned in Strand II", I said in the British Government's opening statement in this Strand, "with relationships within the island of Ireland. It is inescapable that constitutional issues have implications for these relationships - as they do for other topics which fall to be addressed in the Talks as a whole".

2. Together we have, all of us, reflected that view in the agenda we have set for Strand II, although we have also of course acknowledged in the agenda for Strand III that constitutional issues are no less germane to relationships between the two Governments.
3. Not at all surprisingly, we have recognised that these issues contain within them factors which warrant inclusion in our catalogue of obstacles which have to be overcome in our journey towards a settlement.
4. I think it important that we bear in mind that today we are dealing with these matters as part of our survey of obstacles, and not in the mode of substantive negotiations. That will

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come later. In the event, Sir Ninian, we have had a full and frank exchange on constitutional matters, and I believe we now have a fair understanding of the views of everyone around the table.

5. There are, of course, several constitutional issues which participants wish to canvass, as other speakers have made clear. That is, of course, well within our ground rules since the 26 March Statement said:

"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."

Probably no participant is fully satisfied with the constitutional arrangements in our 2 jurisdictions.

6. As to British constitutional arrangements, if there are specific proposals in these talks we shall certainly be ready to consider them, against the accepted general test that they must secure general acceptance, I repeat another element of my predecessor's statement of 26 March when he said:

"Her Majesty's Government reaffirms their position that Northern Ireland's present status as a part of the United Kingdom will not change without the consent of a majority of its people."

7. Though perhaps not everyone will agree, I believe that position was underwritten by the Anglo-Irish Agreement; as indeed was the proposition that we, and the Irish Government, would give effect to any wish that might in future be expressed by a majority of the people of Northern Ireland for any alternative status.
  
8. As to Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution, HMG fully accepts the sincerity with which the Unionist delegations argue that any successful outcome from the Talks process must include the repeal or amendment of those Articles. The Alliance Party has also drawn attention to the importance it attaches to this matter.
  
9. My predecessor called Articles 2 and 3 unhelpful. I endorse that. Their provisions, which do give rise to a territorial claim, have generated adverse reactions of which we are very well aware. But in practical terms there is, in our view, no doubt at all about Northern Ireland's position as part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, in both domestic and international law. Accordingly my concern about Articles 2 and 3, unhelpful though they are because of their inherent nature, is not that they constitute a realistic threat to our constitutional arrangements, or that the Irish Government would seek to assert their implied claim through force. Our concern is rather that for a different reason they constitute a greater obstacle to that normalisation of relationships on this island which all of us seek.

10. This is because, in particular, the British Government is quite clear that it ought to seek, and it will seek, as a product of the Talks process as a whole, an unambiguously expressed consensus on the constitutional issues, as part of a framework for relationships which will be generally acceptable to all. This should extend to a statement of the present position of Northern Ireland, which we understand implies necessary amendments to Irish constitutional provisions.

11. The question we have to face up to, indeed we have been considering it for some time now, is whether there is likely to be a convergence on these important and sensitive constitutional matters by the end of the Talks process. HMG has always regarded that as a realistic target. From what we have heard the Irish Government say today we are encouraged.

12. Before suggesting the basis on which we might go forward, perhaps I could make a general point. The Talks as a whole have to address a wide range of interlocking issues, all of which are dependent to some degree on the conclusions drawn in respect of other issues. No doubt each delegation has some matter or matters which they regard as of pre-eminent importance, but not surprisingly delegations will not always agree on what such issues are.

13. These considerations led us all to agree on the structure of the Talks and on the proposition that nothing could be agreed in any one strand until everything had been agreed in the Talks

as a whole. Properly understood this is a corporate and co-operative process of constructing a generally acceptable settlement in pursuance of a common aim, rather than an exercise in bargaining to which the language of the quid pro quo is apt. It gives us the freedom to address each issue on a contingent basis, able to enter reservations where necessary and, as is implicit in our ground rules, to dodge back and forth and to withhold full commitment until we have all had an opportunity to assess the emergent outcome of the Talks as a whole. We must, I suggest, exploit that freedom.

14. Against that background, I see grounds for real encouragement in the statement which the Irish Government delegation has made in relation to the option of recommending to the people the revision of Articles 2 and 3. On the understanding of the constitutional position that we have been given, we shall argue that such change should occur.
15. It is common ground amongst us all that the substantive exchanges we have had on constitutional matters have not been fully concluded, and that it will be necessary at the appropriate point to return to them, perhaps more than once; and in Strand III (where they feature as agenda item 7) as well as in Strand II.
16. But daunting though the programme ahead of us undoubtedly is, I believe that we may now have now established a basis on which substantive exchanges in Strand II can continue, to the point

of addressing possible institutional arrangements to reflect "the common desire of the people of the island of Ireland for a new relationship".