

DRAFT STATEMENT

1. Mr Speaker, I am pleased to be able to inform the House that following extensive discussions with the constitutional political parties in Northern Ireland and with the Irish Government - a basis for formal political talks now exists. I frankly acknowledge to the House that this would not have been possible without the good will and determination of the Northern Ireland parties and the helpful and constructive approach taken by the Irish Government. The stated positions of all these parties is well known.

2. In the light of my discussion with Mr Collins, the Irish Foreign Minister, on [] January I can confirm that Her Majesty's Government and the Government of the Republic of Ireland would be prepared to consider a new and more broadly based agreement or structure to replace the Anglo-Irish Agreement if such an arrangement can be arrived at through direct discussion and negotiation between all of the parties concerned. This is in accordance with the position of both Governments that Northern Ireland's present status as a part of the United Kingdom will not change without the consent of a majority of the people who live there. I refer the House to the relevant passage of my speech on 5 July.

3. To allow an opportunity for such a wider political dialogue the two Governments have decided not to hold a meeting of the Anglo-Irish Conference in the period between [x and y]. All of the parties concerned will make use of this interval for comprehensive discussions to seek the new and more broadly-based agreement which I have just described.

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4. As the Conference will not be meeting between the specified dates the Secretariat at Maryfield will accordingly not be required for that period to discharge its normal role of servicing Conference meetings provided for in Article 3 of the Agreement.

5. The parties involved in this process will be the two Governments and the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland, the Social Democratic and Labour Party, the Ulster Democratic Unionist Party and the Ulster Unionist Party.

6. It is accepted that discussions must focus on three main relationships: between both sides of the community in Northern Ireland, including the relationship between any new institutions there and the Westminster Parliament; between both parts of Ireland; and between the two Governments. It is common ground between all the parties that hope of achieving a new and more broadly based agreement rests on finding a way to give adequate expression to the totality of the relationships I have mentioned.

7. Talks will accordingly take place in three strands corresponding respectively to these relationships. In discussions on the relationship between both parts of Ireland, the Unionist parties will be part of the United Kingdom team.

8. It is accepted by all those involved that, if full use is to be made of the interval between meetings of the conference to achieve an overall agreement satisfactory to all, it will be necessary to have launched all three sets of discussions by approximately halfway through the interval.

9. A first step towards getting related discussions under way in all three strands will be the opening, as soon as possible, of substantive talks between the parties in Northern Ireland under my

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chairmanship. These will commence with a round of bilateral meetings between the individual parties and myself before moving, when I believe an appropriate point has been reached, to plenary sessions. The other strands, both of which will of course involve the Irish Government, will be launched when I judge, in consultation with the parties, that the time is right in the light of progress already made.

10. The internal talks, like the talks in the other strands, will follow a demanding and intensive schedule. All concerned have assured me they will participate in good faith and will make every effort to achieve progress.

11. It is accepted by all the parties that nothing will be finally agreed in any strand until everything is agreed in the talks as a whole and that confidentiality will be maintained thereunto. However, in the final analysis the outcome must be accepted by the people.