

## Strand 2 Negotiations, 20 October, 1997

### Opening Statement by Minister for Foreign Affairs

Mr. Chairman

The item before us today is constitutional issues. I think it is accurate to say that this will be one of the more sensitive area of discussion in these entire negotiations.

Constitutional issues go to the very core and origins of the divisions which these negotiations are seeking to overcome. They relate to the partition of Ireland and the relationship of Northern Ireland with the rest of the island of Ireland and with Great Britain. They are central to the identity and aspirations of both nationalists and Unionists.

Nobody can dispute that the present constitutional arrangements governing this island have been a cause of long-running dissension. While Nationalists have refused their consent to those provisions of British constitutional legislation governing the status of Northern Ireland, Unionists have made clear their rejection of Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution.

It was against this background that the two Governments accepted in the Joint Framework Document that any overall settlement would need to include a balanced accommodation of the differing views of the two main traditions on the constitutional issues in relation to the special position of Northern Ireland.

My Government continues to regard the approach set out in the Framework Document as the most likely means of achieving such an accommodation. We have therefore set out in full the relevant paragraphs of the Framework Document in the paper which we have submitted to the Chairmen of Strand 2.

We are deeply sensitive to the profound importance of Constitutional issues for both traditions in Ireland, in terms of identity, allegiance, aspiration and ethos. That is why we have stressed in our paper that whatever emerges from these negotiations in terms of constitutional change cannot reflect in any sense the pre-eminence of one tradition over the other, but rather must represent an honorable, balanced accommodation of the positions of both.

Mr. Chairman,

We may have time only for a preliminary exchange of views today on these highly sensitive issues. However, if we continue to follow the constructive pattern of last week's exchanges, I believe that we can look forward to real progress in the negotiations at a relatively early date.