

SDLP STATEMENT TO STRAND THREE PRELIMINARY MEETING

Chairmen

The SDLP thank you for this opportunity to be present today and to make our submission. It is indeed a meeting of historic significance in that the two Governments will give preliminary consideration to the issues likely to arise in Strand III of the Talks process.

The SDLP welcomes as it always has done meetings involving the two Governments. The problem that we face and seek to finally resolve derives fundamentally from British/Irish relations and the failure up to now to sort out those relations to everyone's satisfaction. It follows logically therefore that the best possible peaceful and democratic way of resolving our problem is through the two Governments working as closely as possible together to resolve our differences and to create the atmosphere in which the healing process among our divided peoples can take place. For that very reason meetings between the two Governments are crucially important and should never be regarded as an obstacle to peace and reconciliation. We conclude from the public anxiety that other parties have expressed about the need for today's meeting that they now concur with us and do not see inter-Governmental meetings as impeding progress in any way.

It is clear that the ultimate responsibility for a final resolution of what has often been called "an age old problem" rests primarily with both Governments. It would be the hope of the SDLP that it would be the declared objective of both Governments to achieve in their talks what is a lasting and peaceful settlement. We recognise the enormous difficulties that lie in the way largely due to the distrust that has built up from our difficult past. However we believe that both Governments should devote major and detailed attention to this task in consultation with all democratic parties in Northern Ireland. When Strand III begins they should set out in a major declaration their commitment to the objective of lasting peace on the island of Ireland and between the peoples of both islands. They should also acknowledge the failures of the past while recognising that we have now entered a new era of relationships between and among divided peoples across Europe and that the new atmosphere thus created is the atmosphere that will make a major contribution to the process of agreeing our relationships and of giving agreed institutional expression to such agreements.

The SDLP recognise that while different parties place different importance on the relationships to be resolved and therefore the importance of different strands of the Talks that it is clear to any objective mind and agreed in the March 26 statement that all the relationships have to be addressed and agreed. We therefore conclude, given the time already allocated to Strand I that it is long past time when the Secretary of State should exercise this responsibility given to him under the March 26 statement and formally fix a date for the commencement of Strand II.

The SDLP hopes that this will be the major outcome of today's meeting together with clear commitment to formal Strand III meetings. The SDLP are firmly of the opinion that if the Secretary of State does not exercise that responsibility then the credibility of the whole talks process will be seriously threatened.

As we have repeatedly made clear the SDLP would like to see emerge from this talks process an agreement that will transcend in importance any previous agreement ever made and which will provide lasting peace and stability in Ireland.

As the thrust of this meeting is mainly procedural we suggest the following agenda for Strand III discussions.

Suggested Agenda for Strand III

1. Approval of agenda
2. Opening presentation by each Government
3. Declaration by the two Governments of their commitment to the objective of lasting peace on the island of Ireland and between the peoples of both islands
4. Consideration of the causes of the conflict
5. Requirements to address the problem
6. Possible institutional arrangements
7. Consequential measures
8. Matters referred from Strand I and Strand II
9. Endorsement of overall agreement
10. Approval of conclusions and closing statements