

MESSAGE FROM THE TAOISEACH AND THE PRIME MINISTER

The Talks process in which the two Governments and the four Northern Ireland parties are now engaged offers an historic opportunity to make lasting political progress. We have together set out to achieve a new beginning for relationships within Northern Ireland, within the island of Ireland and between the peoples of these islands.

As Heads of the Irish and British Governments, we have consistently made clear the great importance which we attach to these Talks and our wholehearted support for them. We reaffirm this support, and send our warmest wishes to all the participants, on the occasion of the opening of Strand Two of the Talks.

We owe a particular debt of gratitude to the Independent Chairman of Strand Two, Sir Ninian Stephen. He was appointed to this role by the two Governments a year ago, following consultation with the four parties and with the approval of the Australian Government. We are deeply appreciative of his willingness to assume this responsibility and expect that we will have further cause to be grateful to him for the way in which he will discharge it.

Everyone who is involved in the Talks process understands the complexity of the issues which are being addressed and the sincerity with which conflicting views are held by different participants. An opportunity now exists for open, constructive and far-reaching dialogue both on the issues which divide the two main traditions in Ireland and on those which unite them. All of us share a common commitment to the values of constitutional politics and a total rejection of violence as a means of achieving political progress.

We reaffirm the readiness of the two Governments, as the signatories of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, to consider a new and more broadly based agreement or structure if this can be arrived at through direct discussion and negotiation between all the parties concerned.

We do not underestimate the difficulty of the task which lies ahead. But we know that all concerned will participate in good faith and make every effort to achieve progress. We wish the participants in Strand Two every success in this historic endeavour.