

ALD2/2/6/10/2/257

two
tracks

Ulster Unionist Party

Comments on Ground Rules paper of 15 March 1996

There should have been discussion of this topic with the parties concerned before the British and Irish Governments committed themselves to a precise scheme.

A consultation paper would have been appropriate. A genuine consultation paper, of course, would be one that discussed the merits of alternative approaches. It would not present, as does the paper of 15 March, a single scheme that is worked out in detail with no apparent room for change.

The 15 March paper reproduces the scheme used in the unsuccessful 1992 inter-party talks. It was our view, expressed immediately after those talks ended, and reiterated more recently, that the ground rules employed then contributed significantly to the failure. Indeed, our view is that the only times when there was significant progress in those talks was when we departed from the format embodied in the 15 March paper. The objective therefore must be to improve on the 1992 procedures.

The Three Strands

There is an ambiguity in the use of this term. It is sometimes used to refer to the range of issues that have to be discussed, ie to say that discussion cannot be limited to so-called internal matters (strand 1) but must also cover relationships between the United Kingdom as a whole and Northern Ireland in particular with the Republic of Ireland (strands 2 & 3). We accept the three strand approach in this sense. The phrase is sometimes used to refer to the concept of having three separate negotiating teams engaged in three separate sets of talks, which then have to be co-ordinated. We do not however think that this concept is a sensible way of conducting a negotiation. There are inherent objections to this unnecessarily cumbersome procedure.

It would be far better to have a single negotiating team that would work through a comprehensive agenda. That comprehensive agenda would cover the whole range of issues that are covered by the phrase "the three strands" and could do so in a coherent manner. It would be necessary to vary the participants depending on the topic, ie that the Irish Government would drop out when internal matters were being covered and the parties when sensitive intergovernmental security matters were being covered. This, incidentally, would be a more effective than the proposed blanket ban on the parties with regard to so-called strand 3 matters.