

Liaison Sub-Committee on Confidence Building Measures - 8 October 1997

Opening Statement.

Mr. Chairman,

I welcome this opportunity to address this first meeting of this Sub-Committee and to set out some of the Irish Government's views on this very important issue, which has the capacity to contribute significantly the success of our negotiations on future arrangements for Northern Ireland.

We believe that in a divided society there is an incalculable value in trying to bridge the deep divisions of fear with an active programme of confidence building measures. The job of building confidence must belong equally to all the participants in the talks process.

The ending of that which divides us can only come about through the agreement and the cooperation of the two traditions on this island. That is our task as we set out in these negotiations.

If we are to deal with our differences, trust and confidence has to be built between us. The three Strand process will address and seek to reach agreement

on new arrangements that encompass the totality of relationships on these two islands. No outcome is excluded. For our part, we believe that any settlement must include genuine parity of esteem, equality of treatment and recognition of the equal validity of both traditions.

Clearly a major contribution to building confidence among both communities in Northern Ireland is the absence of the threat of violence. I welcome therefore the restoration of the IRA ceasefire and take this opportunity to commend both that decision and the Combined Loyalist Military Command for their continued observance of the ceasefires. Together they provide the positive atmosphere that is necessary to encourage and assist our search for a lasting peace. Peace also provides us with the space to explore other ways of bridging the long history of fear and distrust that has complicated relationships. In this climate, confidence building measures have an important role in breaking down barriers.

This Committee's remit provides considerable scope for the discussion of issues where the confidence of one or both communities could be significantly assisted by the adoption of certain measures. We will have ample time in future meetings to go into detail on the benefits of individual confidence measures.

One immediate and visible example of helping to reduce tensions would be in the way of deploying the security forces. We will continue to urge that, in normal circumstances, the security presence be scaled down. We also welcome the Secretary of State's intentions to review emergency legislation. Progress on the equality agenda has been made in recent years but there remains much to be done.

It is essential, and in my view which might help significantly to consolidate the peace, that we continue to focus in an imaginative and humanitarian way on those who are imprisoned, be they republican or loyalist. We must approach the question of the prisoners in a constructive and generous way. This has been the approach of successive Irish Governments as witness to the decision very recently to grant some early releases. We have also encouraged the British Government, and the authorities in other jurisdictions, to adopt a similar flexible and generous approach. Work with the British Government is progressing well on the issues of the transfer of prisoners to the Republic, particularly those who have served long terms, and on the improvement of conditions in which prisoners are held. All of these matters continue to send positive and reassuring signals to both communities.

In highlighting the plight of prisoners, we must not forget the concerns of the victims of violence and their families. The concerns of families of all victims of the conflict may be an additional area, which lends itself to confidence building measures.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, progress on confidence building measures will help underpin confidence in the peace process itself. My Government is determined to ensure that we take every opportunity to encourage it in this Committee and in the other Strands.