

Paper by Her Majesty's Government

Introduction

At its meeting on 9 March 1992 the Business Committee agreed that the Government team should prepare a paper drawing together the common themes emerging from the submissions of 28 June 1991 put to the previous Talks process by each of the parties. On 29 April the Business Committee agreed that a companion paper should be prepared offering HMG's view of some of the key political realities facing Talks participants, reflecting views expressed by the parties in their initial presentations to last year's Talks, or in subsequent exchanges in the course of them. (It does not, however, purport to summarise or pre-empt the parties' own positions). This paper discharges that second remit.

2. Paragraphs 3-13 below accordingly aim to identify various key political realities which, HMG suggests, should be taken into account in the search for a comprehensive political accommodation in relation to Northern Ireland. They are offered not as a definitive treatment of the difficult issues with which they deal, but simply as an aid to informing future debate.

Realities

3. Whatever the historical rights and wrongs, Northern Ireland is a part of the United Kingdom. The Government exercises full sovereign authority in Northern Ireland and acknowledges a responsibility to all the people there to provide security, stability and good government. There is also a set of geographical, historical and political realities which give the Government of the Republic of Ireland an interest in relevant Northern Ireland matters.

4. Northern Ireland has a deeply divided community, characterised by traditions and identities which reach out beyond Northern Ireland itself. It has suffered from an absence of agreement on

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political arrangements which would allow representatives from both main parts of the community to play a full and effective part in the political life of the Province.

5. The larger part of the community in Northern Ireland retains a strong sense of loyalty to the Crown and believes that its culture and ethos can be preserved only if Northern Ireland remains a part of the United Kingdom. The minority community in general identifies itself in cultural terms with the people of the Republic of Ireland: politically, many in that community aspire to the achievement of a sovereign territorially-united Ireland.

6. Terrorism in support of and in opposition to a change in the constitutional status of Northern Ireland has done much damage, although it has been steadfastly resisted by the vast majority of the people of Northern Ireland. It has also made necessary the substantial commitment of UK Armed Forces in support of the RUC. All the participants in the Talks are united in their absolute condemnation and rejection of terrorism and commitment to the democratic process.

7. The exercise by the police and Armed Forces of the emergency powers which are necessary to enable them to tackle terrorism effectively is often felt by the minority community to bear particularly heavily on them, further increasing their sense of alienation from the institutions of the state and providing a source of propaganda for extremist Republican groups. But the security forces need to command the confidence and support of the whole community in their efforts to defeat terrorism from whatever quarter.

8. Many sources of inequality between the two parts of the community have been removed. And intensive efforts have been and are being made to tackle the problem of discrimination and to target the areas of greatest social need. But there remain substantial social and economic inequalities. This further exacerbates inter-communal divisions, reduces the extent to which certain parts of the minority tradition are likely to identify

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with the institutions of the state, and may contribute to the readiness on the part of a small minority to resort to terrorism.

9. The lack of functioning political institutions at provincial level, and the fact that few significant powers are exercised at district council level, mean that there is much less democratic accountability for the government of Northern Ireland below the level of Parliament at Westminster than is desirable. This constrains the extent to which government can be responsive to local needs, reduces the opportunity for constructive political exchanges between representatives of the two parts of the community, and deprives political talent of the outlets it needs.

10. Northern Ireland has long been treated as a distinct administrative unit. Most services below the level of core central government functions are delivered on a province-wide basis, with executive responsibilities often devolved to sub-regional Boards or other agencies. This has enabled the Northern Ireland Departments to develop distinct policies appropriate to the particular needs of Northern Ireland and has led to the creation of a particular administrative and legislative framework.

11. There is a unique relationship between the peoples of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. The two Governments are firmly committed to the positive development of that relationship and to continuing close contact, consultation and co-operation on matters of mutual concern, such as cross-border security and economic co-operation.

12. The significance of the European Community (EC) in relation to Northern Ireland, the rest of the UK and the Republic of Ireland is generally acknowledged, although views differ on the implications. There is a case that the development of a "European" identity may help in the resolution of tensions between the two main political traditions on the island of Ireland, and

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within Northern Ireland. One practical point is that since the 1970s there has been a substantial increase in the coverage of EC Directives, particularly in respect of "transferred" matters, notably agriculture.

13. The economy of Northern Ireland has held up comparatively well during the recession but continues to suffer from the direct and indirect effects of terrorism, which is a factor potential investors in Northern Ireland may take into account. Public expenditure in Northern Ireland, determined on a basis which reflects the needs of the people of Northern Ireland, requires a substantial subvention from the UK Consolidated Fund, of some £2 billion in 1991/92.