

Statement by Chairperson on Publication of A New Framework for Agreement

24 February 1995

Before we proceed to our next business - a debate on Obstacles to Reconciliation in the South - I shall make some preliminary remarks on the framework document.

On behalf of the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation, I should like to welcome the publication on Wednesday of A New Framework for Agreement, and to salute the perseverance, ingenuity, creativity and courage of both the British and Irish Governments in bringing forward this statement of their shared understanding of how to assist discussion and negotiation involving the Northern Ireland parties.

The Forum for Peace and Reconciliation has its origins in the Joint Declaration of December 1993. Our terms of reference, in setting us the task of consulting on and examining ways in which lasting peace, stability and reconciliation can be established by agreement among all the people of Ireland, are suffused with the spirit of the Joint Declaration. The guiding principles which underlie the Declaration - self-determination, the freely-given consent of the governed, commitment to exclusively democratic and peaceful means, full respect and protection for the rights and identities of both traditions - also explicitly form the basis of the Framework Document. Our work since our formation last October has above all been concerned with reconciliation and understanding, and I believe that our experience demonstrates that nobody has anything to fear - and everybody has much to gain - from frank, open and inclusive dialogue. Thus, on behalf of all of the members of the Forum, I urge all those with an interest in creating a peaceful, tolerant, and prosperous Ireland, both North and South, to be prepared to talk to one another - whatever they may think of the detail of the Framework itself.

The complex issues raised in the document are, ultimately, for discussion in a negotiating arena in which all parties are present. Nevertheless, I believe that it would be useful for the Forum to have an initial debate on the Framework at an early date, and we will be consulting with delegations in the coming days on how this might best be structured. We will keep the question of how we subsequently advance our work on constitutional issues and political structures under careful review. Our overriding objective will be to assist to the best of our ability in

consolidating the peace process and in encouraging the initiation of comprehensive political dialogue.

There are many other aspects of the Forum's programme - for instance, the detailed study we are initiating on economic issues, or the analysis of fundamental rights and freedoms, or our work on the concept of parity of esteem - which we hope will develop material on which participants in all-party talks might wish to draw. We will also continue to offer a platform allowing organisations, groups and individuals, representative of the people of the island in all their diversity, including members of the Unionist tradition, to have their say.

The Forum is determined that it will honour its mandate to assist in identifying and clarifying issues which could most contribute to creating a new era of trust and co-operation on the island. In so doing, I believe it will make a worthy contribution to the process of achieving a lasting settlement in Ireland, on the journey to which the Framework Document is so historic a milestone.