

AN INITIAL STATEMENT FROM THE ALLIANCE PARTY TO THE FORUM FOR PEACE AND RECONCILIATION ON THE FRAMEWORK DOCUMENTS

Since the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985, one of the great frustrations in our attempts to make progress towards a settlement has been the failure of the two governments to produce their own proposals. I first called in 1989 for the British Government to put its proposals for the future government of Northern Ireland, down on paper for consultation, and I have repeated this call both publicly and privately on many occasions since. During the Inter-Party Talks in 1991 and 1992 my frustration became a shared view amongst many of the political party representatives, and since the end of the formal talks process in late 1992 pressure continued to mount, for a clear statement of the governmental view on the possible shape of a settlement involving all three sets of relationships outlined in the basis for talks of March 1991.

I welcome therefore the publication of the two Framework Documents, not because I agree with all that is there, any more than I agreed with the presentations of the Ulster Unionist Party, the SDLP or the DUP during the talks. I welcome the documents as a very significant contribution to the peace process and I and my colleagues are prepared to continue our discussions with both governments, and all the other political parties, informed by the proposals described in the Framework papers. As I have repeatedly said in the last two weeks, these papers are a basis for negotiation not a basis for hysteria or alarm.

This is not a time to deal in particular detail with very complex proposals, but I would take this opportunity to describe how the Alliance approach to the development of a settlement will continue to depend on our measurement of all proposals against a number of principles.

As our very name, Alliance, makes clear, we will want to ensure that all sides in our community have their rights recognised and respected. In the future, power must never be exercised exclusively by one or other side in favour of their own. Power and responsibility must now be exercised across the divisions in our community, and in the best interests of all our people. There are however, three other principles which inform our judgements.

Firstly, Participation. Does what is proposed give an opportunity for the people of Northern Ireland to be involved in their own governance? In every community the involvement of the people is a moral right and a practical requirement if there is to be stability, allegiance and acceptance of the organs of state. One of the great weaknesses of the Anglo-Irish Agreement was the flimsy way in which this principle was observed. The strength of the Framework proposals lies in the opportunities that are offered for the development of participatory democracy. The establishment of an Assembly, representative North/South structures, a democratising input to the Anglo-Irish Conference, and a North/South Inter-Parliamentary Body are some of the most important ways in which the principle of participation is upheld in these proposals, and this we welcome.

The second principle is Accountability. This requires that the governed are not only involved but empowered. The most striking example of this, is the assertion in the documents that it will be for the people of Northern Ireland to decide their own constitutional future. The entrenchment of this principle in current political vocabulary has certainly made rational discussion about the political future much more possible in Northern Ireland. The principle of accountability also moves us away from appointed bodies towards elected bodies, from arms-length centralism to subsidiarity, and in the case of cross-border relations, it requires that any North/South structure is subordinate and accountable to the Assembly in the North, and the Oireachtas in the South, rather than the reverse. The imperative of accountability is not negotiable. If fully implemented it may resolve other problems. If, for example, policing in Northern Ireland was directly accountable to a power-sharing Assembly, instead of Westminster, many of the deepest of difficulties in this contentious area might begin to become soluble.

The third touchstone which we use is that of Transparency. This Forum is making a very useful contribution to the peace process because it is open and transparent. Its transparency would be greatly assisted if the media in Northern Ireland were as attentive to our proceedings as their

colleagues in this jurisdiction. It is important that our people can see what is going on in their name. Any sense that proceedings are going in secret and behind closed doors always excites anxiety, and in our divided community that does not mean anticipatory anxiety, but rather paranoid anxiety. In South Africa transparency has become a watchword of reform, and so it must also be for us. The essence of transparency is simplicity. Unnecessary complexity is often merely a technique for obfuscation. If there is to be openness and constructive debate, the complexity of this document and its proposals must be overcome. People can understand the need for free and fair elections, a proportionate assembly and power sharing government, but they regard with understandable suspicion the proposal for a panel with curious and uncertain powers and procedures. Northern Ireland people understand the value of cross-border co-operation, and of ministers from both sides meeting to find new ways of working together, but they become suspicious of more grandiose schemes with unclear parameters, especially when some rudimentary co-operative ventures are neglected. Finally, I myself am suspicious when a simple commitment to a Bill of Rights justiciable through our own courts is replaced by paragraphs of meaningless high-sounding diplomacy. Let us have a clear commitment to a Bill of Rights, and of course also to changes in Articles 2 and 3, and if it is of help let us entrench the principle of consent in the Government of Ireland Act. Clarity is the enemy of suspicion and of those who work by deceit.

I believe that the overwhelming majority of people in Northern Ireland want us to talk. I am at this Forum because people want their views to be represented. Gone are the days when they were content to let them go by default. I do not claim to represent Unionists but many Unionist people have contacted me to ask that I take their views into account, when I am participating in this Forum, so that they are not left entirely without a voice where it matters. The people want peace, and after six months of ceasefire they are determined not to return to the nightmare. People are beginning to believe that a stable peace and an honourable settlement is possible. This is a very important development, and one which no one can ignore. We must talk about the future together and I would appeal to the Leaders of Unionism and Loyalism not to allow their fears to deprive them of the opportunity to participate in building a new future. The people are demanding that we negotiate our way forward. The Framework Documents are a milestone in that process.

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