



**An Chartlann Náisiúnta**  
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## Political Talks

### I. Background

1. Over the past two years efforts have been made to launch round-table talks involving three strands, corresponding to the internal relationship between the two communities in Northern Ireland (Strand One), between North and South (Strand Two), and between the two Governments (Strand Three). The ground-rules for the talks, agreed by all participants were set out in a statement by Mr. Brooke on 26 March 1991, (attached) although important practical details (e.g. the choice of the Australian Sir Ninian Stephen as Chairman for Strand 2) were negotiated subsequent to this.
2. Strand One met for three weeks last summer but was brought to an early close by Mr. Brooke on 3 July when it became clear that it would not make significant progress in the "gap" which both Governments had agreed would end with the Conference on July 16th.
3. Since then various contacts took place aimed at relaunching the talks on the same basis - the stated policy of all the participants except the two unionist parties. These latter agreed in December (with perhaps some self-interested prompting from Mr. Brooke) that they would resume the talks and continue them after the election if there was no change of administration. This was rejected by the SDLP and others as implying a partisan view of the outcome of the election.
4. It had been assumed from January onwards that no negotiations would take place before the election, although low-key contacts between the parties and briefing meetings between them and the British were agreed in the interval. The upsurge of violence led to a meeting between Mr. Major and the party leaders on February 11th, which placed renewed emphasis on political dialogue. At a meeting between the four leaders in Belfast on February 28th the unionists somewhat unexpectedly withdrew their reservation relating to

the outcome of the election. This left the four leaders in agreement that they saw "no obstacle to the resumption of talks as soon as possible." Mr. Brooke met with the leaders on 2 March and confirmed he would be discussing the issue at the Inter-Governmental Conference "in the expectation that substantive talks would begin very soon".

## II. Policy Implications

While supporting the talks process the Government has been careful to ensure that

- (a) the process should give full scope to the North-South aspect of the dialogue (i. e. go beyond a purely internal Northern Ireland settlement and avoid Strand Two being subordinate to, or merely endorsing, prior agreement within Northern Ireland).
- (b) the "gap" between Conferences insisted on by the unionists should not in any way undermine the Anglo-Irish Agreement or make it hostage to unionist wrecking tactics.

If, as is generally expected, the election is called around 10/11 March the present gap will be a matter of days and more symbolic than real. The most that can be expected is one or two essentially procedural meetings between Mr. Brooke and the party leaders. It would be important to ensure that the Agreement is operating normally during and immediately after the election campaign. (A post-election deal with unionists could be made easier for either the Tory or Labour Party if the operation of the Agreement was in any way in abeyance). It had earlier been envisaged that the Agreement would be safeguarded by holding a Conference meeting to end the gap immediately the election was called, and another after the new administration was in place. It will now probably be sufficient to have a clear and explicit understanding that the gap ends when the election is called

and a Conference will be held after the election to fix a new gap. The British may want to discuss, as of now, the possibility of a post-election gap being extended to permit longer talks. It might be preferable to leave this point over until we see the post-election situation.

III. Proposed Position

The Government position might therefore be

- (a) welcome for party leaders statement and agreement that no further Conference will take place before the British General election.
- (b) The "gap" would end with the calling of the election and there would be a further Conference shortly after the election.
- (c) That post-election Conference could agree a further gap for resumed talks.

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