

## **Belfast Agreement**

### **KEY:**

N: Narrator

N: The Belfast Agreement is an agreement between the British and Irish Governments and most of the political parties in Northern Ireland. It's also known as the Good Friday Agreement, because it was reached on Good Friday, 10 April 1998. Its aim was to bring an end to the conflict of the previous 30 years and create a new system of government for Northern Ireland in which unionists and nationalists would share power.

### **What did the Agreement say?**

N: On the question of the constitutional status of Northern Ireland, that is, whether it should remain in the United Kingdom or become part of a united Ireland, the Agreement states that this should be the democratic decision of the people. This is called the 'principle of consent'.

The Agreement aimed to build relationships within Northern Ireland, between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and between Britain and Ireland. It is divided into three strands:

Strand One set up the arrangements for the power-sharing Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive.

Strand Two was the Irish dimension to the Agreement. The North–South Ministerial Council and North–South bodies were set up to encourage co-operation that would benefit both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Strand Three established East–West institutions, such as the British–Irish Council, to encourage co-operation and develop good relations between Britain and Ireland.

### **What other issues did the Agreement aim to tackle?**

N: As a result of the Agreement, a new Equality Commission was established. Its role is to encourage equality and good relations between communities and to protect against discrimination on the grounds of age, disability, race, religion and political opinion, gender and sexual orientation.

The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission was also set up to make sure that the Government and other public bodies protect the human rights of everyone in Northern Ireland.

The Agreement called for the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons and a move towards a more 'normal' society in Northern Ireland, in terms of policing and security arrangements. A commission on policing was set up, which resulted in the establishment of the new Police Service of Northern Ireland. A scheme for the early release of prisoners was also created.

### **Was there a vote on the Agreement?**

N: A copy of the Agreement was posted to every household in Northern Ireland, and a referendum was held on 22 May 1998. There was an 82 percent turnout of registered voters, over 71 percent of whom supported the Agreement. Not all political parties supported the Agreement.

A referendum was also held in the Republic of Ireland proposing a change to the Irish Constitution to reflect the Agreement's 'principle of consent'. Over 94 percent of voters supported this.

### **When were the first elections?**

N: The first elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly took place on 25 June 1998. On 2 December 1999, the UK Parliament transferred powers to the Northern Ireland Assembly for the first time. This transfer of powers is called 'devolution'. It means that the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive decide on issues affecting everyday life in Northern Ireland like health, education, roads and housing. Scotland and Wales also have devolved institutions. The UK Parliament still makes laws on issues that affect the whole of the UK, including defence, income tax and immigration.

In the years since the Belfast Agreement, new agreements have been reached to make changes to the way the Assembly operates, to devolve more powers and to overcome political difficulties.