

DRAFT SUMMARY RECORD OF OPENING PLENARY SESSION -
TUESDAY 10 JUNE 1997 (14.10)

Those present:

Independent Chairmen	Government Teams	Parties
Mr Holkeri	British Government	Alliance Party
General de Chastelain	Irish Government	Labour
		Northern Ireland Women's Coalition
		Progressive Unionist Party
		Social Democratic and Labour Party
		Ulster Democratic Party
		Ulster Democratic Unionist Party
		United Kingdom Unionist Party
		Ulster Unionist Party

1. The Chairman (Mr Holkeri) convened the meeting at 14.10, and sought approval of the draft record of the previous two sessions of the Plenary, held on 5 March and 3 June respectively. On hearing no objections, the Chairman approved the draft record of the Plenary held on 5 March for circulation. On the suggestion of the UKUP, it was agreed to defer adoption of the minutes of 3 June until the next meeting of the Plenary.

2. Moving on, the Chairman said that, for logistical reasons, it had not been possible to schedule all of the bilateral meetings between the parties and the Chairmen as proposed during the Plenary of 3 June. He said the Chairmen would continue to arrange these meetings. The Chairman then proposed that the next meeting of the Plenary be held on Tuesday 17 June at 14.00, subject to confirmation by the Chairman on Friday afternoon, 13 June. If such confirmation was not forthcoming, the next meeting of the Plenary would be held not later than Tuesday 24 June at 14.00. The Chairman then invited the parties to comment on this proposal.

3. The UKUP said it appreciated the difficulties involved in organising meetings of the Plenary. It expressed disappointment at the proposed time-table for the talks, referring to statements by the Secretary of State and the Tánaiste of the need to restore public credibility in the multi-party negotiations by proceeding swiftly, as a matter of urgency, to resolve the decommissioning issue. The party referred to rumours that the British and Irish Governments were working on a joint paper or initiative on decommissioning. It voiced its concern that there would be no significant meetings until private consultations and negotiations elsewhere had produced a composite proposal that would then be presented by the two Governments to the multi-party negotiations. The UKUP said decommissioning was of logistical and political relevance to the terms of any future cease-fire. It said there was an increasing belief that the British Government was engaged in negotiations with Sinn Féin/IRA at official level, in order to arrive at an understanding of what was required on decommissioning before they would consider whether to call a cease-fire.

4. The UKUP said there was increasing anxiety over meetings between Government officials and Sinn Féin. Now it is said there maybe a third meeting, depending on 'events on the ground'. The UKUP asked what this meant given the recent IRA bomb at Poleglass and the raking of the New Barnsley RUC station, and a murderous attack on a young man which led to a leg amputation. It maintained that, in these circumstances, the purpose of the contacts with Sinn Féin were not explanatory, but exploratory, aimed at determining the terms and conditions, in particular on decommissioning, required to secure an IRA cease-fire. It doubted that the IRA would be required to commit itself to an unequivocal cease-fire.

In the meantime, the party said the talks were in suspended animation.

5. Contrasting the proposed delay before the next meeting of the Plenary with statements by the two Governments of the need to make progress in the multi-party negotiations, the UKUP asked where was the urgency. It said there would be no urgency until the parameters of an understanding had been reached with Sinn Féin/IRA. It asked how the Secretary of State could make a rounded political judgement that the loyalist cease-fire was still intact, when the Chief Constable of the RUC had said that the loyalist cease-fire had been broken. The party said the negotiations were entering a phase where the credibility of politicians was being corrupted, and public confidence in political decisions denigrated by, on the one hand, a constant process of delaying by the two Governments when suitable and, on the other hand, by a wallop for urgency when plans were in place to mould or coerce the multi-party negotiations into adopting measures put forward by the two Governments.

6. The UKUP said it wished to put on record its view of the proposed time-table for the talks, although it expressed the view that there was little point in making its protest.

7. The Chairman asked the Secretary of State whether she would like to respond to the questions put by the UKUP. The UUP asked whether it could comment before the Secretary of State responded. Since other parties had already requested the floor, it was agreed that the DUP, Alliance and UUP would speak, after which the Secretary of State would respond.

8. The DUP said it had no difficulty in agreeing to the Chairman's proposed time table for the next session of the Plenary.

It concurred with the Chairman's suggestion that, if arrangements had not progressed in time to allow a meeting on 17 June, the next meeting of the Plenary would be held no later than 24 June. The party presumed that the purpose of the delay was to facilitate the Irish Government, which it said was not unreasonable.

9. Moving on, the DUP said decommissioning was neither an element of a settlement nor an ingredient of one of the three strands. It was an essential part of the multi-party negotiations process, the 'ground rules' of that process and, as such, it was not possible to 'pigeon-hole' or defer consideration of this issue. The party said decommissioning was one of the issues which the participants were charged with addressing to their satisfaction at the start of the multi-party talks.

10. Referring to the recent proposals by the UUP leader on decommissioning, the DUP contrasted an article in the 'Belfast Telegraph' of 7 June 1996, in which David Trimble said the UUP would 'stop the talks if decommissioning of all arms doesn't start right away,' with comments by him in an article on 7 June 1997 to the effect that he would countenance the issue being 'pigeon-holed' until such a time as Sinn Féin tried to gain entry to the negotiations. The DUP said this represented a remarkable change, a massive somersault, from the previous position on decommissioning which would effectively remove the basis on which participants were called together. The DUP accepted that, once substantive negotiations on a settlement had begun, it might be politic to defer consideration of some issues in order to facilitate agreement on the broader points of a settlement. However, it reiterated its belief that decommissioning, as one of the foundations of the negotiations process, was not such an issue and could not be side-lined because it was difficult to reach agreement.

11. The DUP interpreted David Trimble's statement to mean Sinn Féin would be allowed entry to the multi-party negotiations on conditions that pertained to other parties. It said the British Government had agreed that Sinn Féin, and the other parties with paramilitary associations, must meet certain criteria, namely a cease-fire and decommissioning. It averred that the UUP was saying that it would suffice for Sinn Féin to meet the conditions at present adhered to by the PUP and UDP. This, it maintained, logically set the parameters for Sinn Féin entry to substantive negotiations. It asserted its belief that it would be a retrograde step to follow the UUP suggestion, and urged that efforts be made to deal with decommissioning now, either in bilateral meetings or in full sessions of the Plenary, regardless of how long this would take.

12. The DUP said it strongly believed that the decommissioning issue must be resolved by the participants moving towards the determination of a programme for decommissioning. The party was quite content for discussion to proceed on that basis without the presence of Sinn Féin.

13. Finally, the DUP said the most valuable lesson it had learnt from the South African experience was the necessity of all participants to feel ownership of the negotiations process. This, it said, did not obtain under the present circumstances. The party said the present process had been created by the two Governments. This was not the way to resolve the problem. It was a fatally flawed process. The DUP said that in the second year of this process, it hoped there would be a readiness to talk about whether participants are satisfied with the process itself and to try to move to a process that all can feel ownership for.

14. Alliance expressed frustration at the failure to reach agreement on how to take the decommissioning issue forward. In an overview of developments over the last 12 months, it said the parties had moved to bilateral and trilateral discussions when it had become apparent that the detailed proposals put forward by individual parties would not provide the basis for agreement. It said that, despite a degree of optimism at the time, it had not proved possible to reach sufficient consensus on a way forward by December 1996. The party wondered whether the problem was in fact decommissioning, or other issues such as the entry criteria for other parties or election results. It said it was unclear why no agreement had been reached to date.

15. Alliance said it believed it was still possible to reach agreement on decommissioning, but wondered what was meant by 'pigeon-holing'. The party referred to its own constructive proposals on decommissioning, and recalled the positive response they had evoked from the UUP at the time. However, several months on, there had been no progress. It said the reason why the two Governments were preparing a joint proposal on decommissioning was the stalemate among the parties on this question. It said other parties should not criticise the governments for attempting to do what they were unable or unwilling to do themselves. Alliance said the reason why the multi-party negotiations had reached an impasse was not because of any post election situation, but because the parties had stalled on the question of reaching agreement on decommissioning. As a result, it would not be possible to move forward without a fundamental change in the negotiations process.

16. Alliance apologised that it had not been possible to arrange meetings for family reasons, and undertook to reschedule them over

the coming days. It said it would consult with the two Governments about the possibilities for progress in the multi-party negotiations. Alliance said its position on how decommissioning should be handled remained the Mitchell Report and the Mitchell Principles. It said this was the only realistic basis on which to proceed. It said that the parties had a choice: either they could sign up to this or the multi-party negotiations would fall to pieces.

17. The UUP said it hoped to refute the comments made by the DUP in a bilateral meeting during the coming week. The UUP asked the Secretary of State about what it called a parallel process of talks with Sinn Féin, and asked whether there would be a third meeting between British Government officials and Sinn Féin in the foreseeable future. It said this was a matter of considerable concern to the UUP. The party said the speech made in Belfast on 16 May by Prime Minister Blair had received a warm welcome among the pro-Union community. It said that if the undertakings made by the Prime Minister were to be credible, prolonged engagement with Sinn Féin could amount to a spanner in the process.

18. The British Government agreed with the UKUP's opening comments about the need for urgency at the talks. In relation to the UKUP's point that the public would conclude that acceptance by the delegates of the Chairman's proposal was tantamount to lack of commitment, it was equally possible for the public to take a negative view of unproductive sessions should they occur. There was nothing Machiavellian or nasty in the Chairman's proposal which in fact allowed for bilaterals during the period in question.

19. The British Government affirmed that the two Governments were trying to do something in a situation where action was manifestly

necessary if progress was to be achieved. There was nothing underhand or deceitful involved. The Governments were simply trying to achieve progress. In relation to the UUP question about the Government officials' discussions with Sinn Féin becoming prolonged the British Government emphasised that these were certainly not ongoing talks. Their purpose was to clarify the Government's position to Sinn Féin. Sinn Féin had requested another meeting. If there were an additional meeting there would be a maximum of one. There would certainly not be drawn out discussions and the delegates were given a categorical assurance on this point.

20. In relation to the DUP's final point about the need for willingness on the part of all parties to the talks to look at the process itself whether in bilaterals or otherwise, the British Government expressed willingness to talk with the DUP any day of the week about the process.

21. In response to the Alliance party the British Government concurred with much of what that party had said but expressed the hope that the talks would proceed faster than in the previous eight months.

22. The SDLP supported the Chairman's proposal and expressed the hope that the parties would all avail of the opportunity for bilateral dialogue for clarification. Sharing the sense of frustration and concern of the other parties the SDLP emphasised that it was not some alien force which had created the relative lack of progress but rather all of the parties to the talks, and the party expressed the hope that dialogue would move forward more quickly. The party was quite content to accept the timetable proposed by the Chairman.

23. The Irish Government said it had no problem with the Chairman's proposal and was appreciative of the understanding of its own present position following the recent election, which had been expressed by the DUP. There was indeed a transitional period in Dublin and the Government was seeking how best to minimise the impact of that on the talks. There would be a new Government on 26 June. In the meantime there would be very early consultations between the existing Government and the opposition parties on talks issues and every effort would be made to minimise any delay at the talks for reasons of changeover. The Irish Government remained conscious of the tremendous need for progress at the talks.

24. The UKUP said it considered that credibility of the talks would be further undermined if the public thought that the process was being put on hold for the Irish Government. The party also said that unionists are at a disadvantage because the SDLP had a channel of information through the Irish Government on the deliberations of the two Governments, whereas the British Government did not share confidences with the unionists. The UKUP said that it was surely time for the British Government to begin sharing information with unionists on an equivalent basis.

25. The Irish Government assured delegates that it would be represented bilaterally at all stages of the talks. In response to the UKUP's suggestion that the Irish Government transition was behind the Chairman's proposal the British Government said that it was only one of a number of factors involved. Insofar as involving the unionists parties in its deliberations the British Government was already fully aware of the positions of the unionists parties as well as those of other parties, and was taking these fully into

account, but would be happy to meet the UKUP at any time in order to discuss any further constructive proposal it might wish to make.

26. The UKUP said that Mr Ahern had declared his intention to look after the nationalists whereas the pro-Union people of Northern Ireland presently had no confidence that the position of the British Prime Minister is to look after them. With respect to an Alliance statement that agreement on aspects of decommissioning had been close, the UKUP said its party and the DUP had never been included and the Alliance had not shared detailed proposals with them.

27. The UKUP then emphasised that if the UUP, with the assistance of the PUP, were to enter into an arrangement with other parties to pigeon-hole decommissioning, they had better address the issue of getting decommissioning out of the pigeon-hole because achieving consensus to get out of the pigeon-hole would be more difficult than putting it in the pigeon-hole.

28. Alliance said that its position on decommissioning had been set out in a paper which had been fully presented to the delegates and discussed at plenary and in subsequent bilaterals. The party had not moved from its widely promulgated position. Its preference was for wide agreement on the decommissioning issue. It would remain available for bilaterals.

29. The PUP said it had no difficulty working to the timetable proposed by the Chairmen and indeed supported bilaterals as the way forward at this point. The PUP said the Secretary of State was working under difficult circumstances, with people who did not want the talks to succeed. The PUP expressed the hope that there were

enough here who really believe the participants can move forward with or without some of the members sitting around the table.

30. The British Government said it will represent the interests of all parties in Northern Ireland and seek full consensus including the UKUP. It expressed the hope that all of the constitutional parties will do all in their power to work for peace in coming days.

31. The NIWC supported the Chairmen's proposal and said that the party would be available for bilaterals.

32. Labour supported the Chairmen's proposal. The party was very pleased with the generous tone of the session except for the doom and gloom which it considered was expressed by the UKUP.

33. The Chairman asked if in the light of all the views expressed there was now any objection to the Chairmen's proposal. There being none he thanked the delegates for their contributions and said that the plenary discussions would resume on Tuesday 17 June at 14.00 subject to confirmation of this by the Chair to each party on the afternoon of Friday 13 June. If such confirmation was not given the Chairmen would arrange a plenary session in consultation with the parties, to occur not later than Tuesday 24 June at 14.00. Between now the next plenary session the Chairmen would arrange meetings with participants.

34. The Chairman then adjourned the proceedings at 15.11.

Independent Chairmen Notetakers
16 June 1997

ps67