

DRAFT SUMMARY RECORD OF OPENING PLENARY SESSION -
MONDAY 21 JULY 1997 (14.10)

Those present:

INDEPENDENT CHAIRMEN	GOVERNMENT TEAMS	PARTIES
Senator Mitchell	British Government	Alliance
Mr Holkeri	Irish Government	Labour
General de Chastelain		Northern Ireland Women's Coalition
		Progressive Unionist Party
		Social Democratic & Labour Party
		Ulster Democratic Party

1. The Chairman convened the meeting at 14.10. He sought the approval of the participants to the draft record of 8 July. On hearing no objections, the minutes were approved as circulated. Moving on, the Chairman suggested that the recent practice of deferring the previous set of minutes for approval (16 July) until the next plenary session be continued. This was agreed.
2. Following a brief intervention from the PUP, the Chairman said he wished to make a brief statement in relation to the day's business. The Chairman said the timetable approved by the participants for the remainder of the Opening Plenary Session allowed for a debate to take place on pending proposals on decommissioning and any proposed amendments thereto. The Chairman said everyone was aware that the Chairmen had received and circulated four different proposals on decommissioning, from the UUP, DUP, UKUP and the two Governments. In addition a series of amendments to the Government proposal had been received from the DUP and UUP. The Chairman continued, saying the original purpose of today's plenary session was to permit a debate on those proposals and amendments. He said that that debate would continue tomorrow with a vote being taken, as originally scheduled, on

Wednesday. The Chairman said that in relation to present business, he wished to suggest that a tour de table be held with each participant making a statement without interruption and following completion of this, a debate could be initiated regarding any aspect of the issue. At the conclusion of today, the Chairman said this process would continue tomorrow before proceeding to a vote on the various proposals etc on Wednesday. The Chairman asked whether there were any comments on this approach.

3. The PUP asked that, under the present conditions, an adjournment should be given until 14.00 hours on Tuesday 22 July. The Chairman in reply said that in order to reflect the requirements of the rules of procedure, he would grant the PUP's request but proposed that the adjournment itself comprise 30 minutes during which time he would consult with the remaining participants about their views on adjourning until 14.00 hours on Tuesday or continuing in the manner which he had proposed a few moments earlier. The Chairman then adjourned the session for 30 minutes at 14.15.

4. On reconvening at 14.47 the Chairman said that during the break he had consulted with all participants during which it seemed clear that no objection would be raised to each participant making a statement on decommissioning and then reconvening the session at noon on Tuesday. The Chairman said if this was the mind of the meeting then he would ask the British Government to start the tour de table.

5. The British Government said that today's meeting came after several months of discussions on the issue of decommissioning which had given all the participants the opportunity to become familiar with each other's positions. The British Government added that it

regretted the absence of the three Unionist parties from the discussions. This position was unfortunate in that it deprived those around the table of the opportunity to debate the proposed amendments tabled by the absent parties. The British Government said it recognised the fact that the UUP were involved in talks with the Prime Minister and it was hopeful that that party would be present for the discussions the following day.

6. The British Government continued, saying its own position was fully set out in the joint paper circulated by both Governments on 25 June, to which was attached the "possible conclusions" which both Governments had tabled for consideration in this discussion and which they believed provided a basis for reaching a generally acceptable resolution of the issue of decommissioning, when a determination was reached on Wednesday. The British Government said that both Governments provided further clarification of their position during last Wednesday and it did not therefore propose to say any more about those "possible conclusions" at this stage.

7. The British Government said it had of course looked carefully at the alternative proposals tabled by the three Unionist parties, and at the various amendments to the two Governments' "possible conclusions" which had been tabled by the DUP and by the UUP. There would be opportunities to make specific comments on individual proposals and amendments at a later stage, but the British Government said it should like to make a few general points. First, the British Government shared the general desire that the restoration of the IRA cease-fire should mark a total and irrevocable end to politically motivated violence in Northern Ireland, and that it should lead as early as possible to the total and verifiable decommissioning of all illegal weapons - Republican and Loyalist - and other terrorist material. However, the British

Government said that it was absolutely confident that the approach reflected in the two Governments' "possible conclusions" was more likely to achieve that result than the approach reflected in any of the alternative proposals.

8. The British Government said that was of course consistent with the Governments' judgement that the Report of the International Body offered the only realistic way of resolving the issue of decommissioning. The British Government was committed to the implementation of all aspects of the Report of the International Body, including the "compromise approach" to decommissioning set out in paragraphs 34 and 35 of that report. The British Government would therefore be unable to support any proposal or amendment which was inconsistent with the Report of the International Body. The third general point was that the British Government fully understood the fears and concerns of those in the Unionist delegations who had been so strident about the need for decommissioning. In any open democracy like ours the British Government said it was of course intolerable that any organisation should resort to terrorism or, having decided to desist that it should hand on to its illegal weapons. As was acknowledged last Wednesday, the concern that the threat of renewed violence could be used to influence the course or outcome of the negotiations was a real and valid one. However, the British Government said it could be - and indeed had been - answered. Any development in these talks required the agreement of parties representing majorities in each part of the community; and any agreed outcome would need to be endorsed by referendum in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The British Government, the people of the Northern Ireland and all the political parties in Northern Ireland, had stood firm against actual terrorism for nearly 30 years. The British Government said it found it inconceivable that all would be

swayed by the threat of violence if any such threat were to be attempted during these talks, quite apart from the fact that that threat would be inconsistent with the Mitchell principles. Given their firm public positions and the political imperatives operating on them, the British Government said it could not see either Government or any other participant agreeing to anything they regarded as unfair or unwise under the threat of force, whether explicit or implicit. In short, the British Government said it was confident that the talks would lead - could only lead - to a democratic and widely acceptable outcome.

9. Finally it was happy to reiterate that both Governments wanted to see the earliest possible decommissioning of all illegal weapons and would be working to achieve due progress, alongside progress in the substantive political negotiations, towards the total and verifiable decommissioning of all such weapons. The British Government said decommissioning, in the sense it had been talking about, required the co-operation of the paramilitary organisations concerned but both Governments had made clear that the mechanisms to enable further progress to be made on decommissioning alongside negotiations in three strands would be in place by 15 September. The British Government said that both Governments would be working to achieve due progress on all aspects of the negotiations from that point onwards.

10. The Irish Government said it fully supported the views expressed by the British Government. It welcomed the restoration of the IRA cease-fire, and said it also hoped it marked an end to all political violence in Northern Ireland. It hoped this would lead to decommissioning occurring as early as possible. The Irish Government said it regretted the absence of the unionist parties. The only way to resolve political differences was through dialogue

and an open exchange of views. It hoped that the Ulster Unionist Party would be present at the following day's Plenary. The Irish Government reaffirmed its commitment to working to achieve due progress in all aspects of the negotiations from 15 September, and in preparatory work before then.

11. Alliance also regretted the absence of the unionist parties, and hoped they would reconsider their decision not to attend. The party said it had laid out its own views on decommissioning at an early stage. It would use its own proposals as guidelines when voting on the two Governments joint proposals. The proposals of the two Governments were entirely congruent with them and so no clarification was required. Alliance said it saw no need for further discussion today, unless other participants required further clarification. Accordingly, it would be happy to adjourn until Tuesday as proposed, and then to vote on Wednesday as outlined in the agreed timetable.

12. Labour also agreed with the motion to adjourn. Noting the absence of the parties that had proposed amendments to the two Governments proposals, it said that none of the parties present could speak for those who had absented themselves. It expressed surprise that they should choose to be absent because of decommissioning. Welcoming the restoration of the IRA cease-fire, the party said all yearned for peace, and said it was important that negotiations should occur against the background of a peaceful environment. It expressed sorrow at the loss of life caused by the troubles in and around the Lurgan area, mentioning in particular the murder of Ian Lyons in 1995 and Michael McGoldrick last year, and the recent killing of Bernadette Martin. It said it did not wish to find itself in the same position a year from now, mourning further deaths in the community, and said this was its motivation

for working for a settlement. It said those who, by refusing to sit down and resolve their political difficulties, contributed to the tensions that caused atrocities were as much to blame as those who pulled the trigger. It was incumbent on all delegations to bring about a just and lasting settlement.

13. The NIWC welcomed the restoration of the IRA cease-fire, which it hoped would be permanent. It said it hoped the death of Bernadette Martin would be the last tragedy of the troubles. The party said it welcomed the prospect of inclusive talks beginning on 15 September, and had always stated its belief that negotiations should be based on inclusivity and peace. It was wonderful that they would finally have the two together. The NIWC said it supported the Chairman's report on decommissioning. It welcomed the two Governments' proposals, which it said needed no further clarification. It was happy to adjourn as proposed. It regretted the absence of the three unionist parties, and hoped they would return, as it wished to arrange bilateral meetings with them. The party urged participants to use the adjournment to arrange bilateral meetings so that everyone could return to plenary apprised of each other's views on the important issue of decommissioning.

14. The PUP said its own views on decommissioning were well known and referred delegates to its June statement on the subject. The SDLP said it strongly supported the two Governments' proposals. It said the importance of decommissioning had been over exaggerated, contrasting this with the lack of attention paid to the requirement on all parties entering the multi-party negotiations to sign up to the Mitchell principles of non-violence. This, it said, was a clear and powerful statement of each party's commitment to democratic and peaceful methods.

15. The UDP said there was nothing to be gained from further debate in the absence of the three unionist parties. It supported the Chairman's proposal to adjourn the Plenary until 22 July, but said it had meetings arranged that would not allow its delegates to attend at 12.00 as suggested. The Chairman said he wished to accommodate all delegations in his proposal and asked when the UDP would be free to attend the Plenary. The UDP said it would be free from 13.00 and, hearing no further comments or objections, the Chairman adjourned the meeting at 15.05 until 13.00 on Tuesday 22 July.

Independent Chairman Notetakers
23 July 1997

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