

DRAFT SUMMARY RECORD OF OPENING PLENARY SESSION -
MONDAY 28 JULY 1997 (16.10)

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
		Ulster Unionist Party

1. The Chairman convened the meeting and sought approval of the minutes of the sessions of the Plenary held on 21 and 22 July. Upon hearing no comments, the minutes were adopted without amendment. As the Plenary held on 23 July had been lengthy, the draft record was not yet available, and would be circulated along with the record of this meeting for approval by participants on their return in September.

2. Moving on, the Chairman said that he and his two colleagues had met with each of the participants to ascertain their views on the suggestion made at the last meeting of the Plenary for an adjournment of the Plenary until early September. The Chairman proposed that each participant state its view on the pending subject in a tour de table, after which the Plenary would adjourn until September.

3. The British Government said the best course of action would be to adjourn the Plenary today until early September. It said that the facilities in Castle Buildings would be available to participants on the same basis as last summer. It stated its

belief that the two Governments and the participants were seeking to make progress on the commitment to start substantive negotiations in September.

4. The Irish Government welcomed the statement made by the Joint Chairmen on 23 July. It agreed with the approach of the British Government, and would maintain contact with the participants over the summer. From the first week of September the Irish Government would be represented in Castle Buildings. The Irish Government said it looked forward to the Plenary reconvening in an effort to make rapid progress on the remainder of the agenda for the Opening Plenary, and expressed its hope that all parties would be represented at the talks when they resumed in September.

5. Alliance said it regretted that it had not been possible to follow the timetable originally agreed by the participants. It said it looked forward to making progress in September. Whether that progress would be rapid or otherwise remained to be seen. Labour placed on record its thanks to the Chairmen and their staff. It said it concurred with the proposal that the Plenary adjourn until September. The NIWC said it was also happy to adjourn. It said it would like to see the decommissioning issue resolved in early September. The summer provided an opportunity for the participants to consult one another, and the NIWC would be available for bilateral meetings over the coming weeks.

6. The PUP said it was content with the programme proposed by the Chair. It would also be available throughout August for meetings with any of the participants. The party said the people were crying out for peace, stability and political progress. There was now another opportunity to achieve this, and the PUP urged participants to avail of it.

7. The SDLP said it was difficult not to note that the Plenary had adjourned almost 12 months ago to the day on the same issue. It said it was disappointed that agreement had not been reached on the difficult and sensitive issue of decommissioning, so that the process could adjourn on the eve of substantive negotiations. It noted the clear determination of the two Governments to make rapid progress when the Plenary resumed, to which it added its own commitment. The party hoped participants would be determined to deal on 15 September with the business that all of them had been sent to do. The SDLP expressed its thanks to the Chairmen and their staff. It also noted that this was the last Plenary to be attended by Seán Ó hUiginn. The party placed on record its appreciation of his contribution, and wished him well in his new position.

8. The UDP said it too would accept the proposed timetable. It said it hoped participants would use the summer break to ensure that when they returned in September they would be able to complete the agenda for the Opening Plenary by sufficient consensus. It recognised there was a carefully crafted procedure to ensure a level of consensus with which to move the process forward, and hoped that this might be built up before 15 September.

9. The UUP said it would accept the proposal of the Chair that there would be a meeting of the Plenary on 15 September, or earlier as decided. It said it wished to preserve a degree of flexibility at the moment, and that it would look at the options on decommissioning. The party said it looked forward to the Irish Government being able to say that it expected decommissioning to take place during talks. It said it was awaiting a response from the British Government to a letter it had sent some time before.

Until it had received clarification on these two points it was unable to say whether it would be in the talks, and in which format.

10. The Chairman said that during this week and the first week in September the facilities would be fully open for bilateral meetings with both Governments also being represented during these periods. The UUP said it wished to raise the issue of the importation of illegal firearms into the Republic. It asked whether these arms had been destined for the IRA, commenting that, if this were the case, it would colour the Secretary of State's invitation to Sinn Féin to participate in negotiations. It asked the Irish Government if it would make a statement on the issue. The Irish Government said it was sure the UUP would wish to congratulate the Gardaí on the seizure of weapons at Dublin Port. Enquiries were being made by the Gardaí, and other relevant police forces were being consulted. The Irish Government said it was not yet able to say which, if any, group the consignment was intended for.

11. The UUP thanked the Irish Government for its reply, and said it would await the outcome of the enquiries. It again noted the role of the Secretary of State in issuing an invitation to Sinn Féin to enter the multi-party negotiations, and expressed its hope that the British Government would seek clarification on this issue before making its decision. The British Government stated that it would ascertain the facts on all situations that arose and make its judgement in the round. Its decision would be based on facts and, as such, it could not at this stage make a decision on the issue raised by the UUP. It added that it had not issued a written reply to the UUP letter as talks with the party were ongoing, and the Prime Minister intended to meet with the UUP leadership. The British Government assumed that the UUP would await the end of

these discussions, but was happy to provide a response now if one were desired. The UUP said it was amazed at this response from the British Government. It said it had made clear its desire for a written response at two previous meetings, and observed that other parties had received a letter in response to their queries.

12. There being no further comments, the Chairman wished participants well for the summer and adjourned the Plenary at 16.21 until 12.00 on 9 September.

Independent Chairmen Notetakers
4 August 1997

OIC/ps75