

**SUMMARY RECORD OF OPENING PLENARY SESSION -
WEDNESDAY 24 SEPTEMBER 1997 (21.24)**

Those present:

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

1. The Chairman (Mr Holkeri) convened the meeting at 21.24 and thanked all participants for their patience throughout the day. He said he now wished to proceed to a vote on the procedural motion (previously circulated) but before doing so would ask the Governments to comment.

2. The British Government said it would be brief but wished to echo the comments of the Chairman regarding the patience which all the participants had shown both today and over the previous ten days. It said it hoped that the reward for such patience would be the procedural motion, which had been drawn up in consultation between the Governments in the light of discussions which had taken place over many months, and following detailed exchanges with the participants in recent days. The British Government said it was to be noted that the final agreement which allowed the procedural motion to be tabled had come from the participants themselves. The British Government added that the tabling of the procedural motion reflected the widespread view among participants in the negotiations, within the community in Northern Ireland and more widely, that the time had come to move beyond the opening Plenary

session and to commence substantive political negotiations leading to a comprehensive political settlement which adequately addressed the totality of relationships. The British Government continued saying that although the motion was complex and lengthy, the issues would be very familiar to all the participants and it trusted it would therefore be possible to move forthwith to a determination. The British Government said if, as it believed and hoped would be the case, the motion was agreed, everyone would be turning an important page in the history of Northern Ireland. The new chapter would involve inclusive and substantive negotiations taking place in a peaceful atmosphere. Such negotiations had the potential to bring huge benefits to all the people of these islands and in particular all the people of Northern Ireland. The British Government said it hoped everyone could support the motion on this basis.

3. The Irish Government said it wished to thank colleagues and participants for their patience and forbearance. It said the participants had engaged in dialogue in a meaningful way for the benefit of the people of Northern Ireland. The Irish Government said there was a ray of light shining across Northern Ireland tonight which hopefully would lift the hearts of all its inhabitants. It said it hoped that the substantive negotiations would be successful, though it realised that there were many other hurdles which had to be jumped. This would probably require even greater work on the part of the participants than before, but as the British Government had alluded to, achieving success in this work should lead to greater benefits for the people of Northern Ireland.

4. The Chairman said the procedural motion had now been introduced. He now wished to proceed to vote on the motion section

by section. The Chairman explained that the process would vote on the introduction and paragraph 2(a), then 2(b), then 2(c), then paragraphs 3, 4 and 5. The Chairman sought agreement to this.

5. The UUP said it had no objection to voting taking place on individual paragraphs as suggested by the Chairman. This was not outside past precedents established when the rules of procedure had been voted on and agreed. The UUP, however, wished to know whether the Chairman intended to put the motion as a whole to the Plenary, following the paragraph by paragraph voting.

6. The Chairman responded saying that the precedent had been that proposers of the motion had the option of having it voted on section by section and that would be the procedure to be followed now. If each section of the motion was agreed, the Chairman said it was his opinion that a further vote was necessarily needed on the whole document. The Chairman then asked the Chairman of the Business Committee to recall from previous minutes what the voting procedures had been when the rules of procedure were determined.

7. The Chairman of the Business Committee said that when the rules of procedure were adopted, the participants had highlighted the contentious rules which had then been voted on individually. Following this the remaining rules of procedure were voted on. The participants, however, did not vote on the complete package of rules. The Chairman of the Business Committee said that he believed the UUP was saying that the procedural motion was one entity and therefore adoption of its entire contents was required. The Chairman of the Business Committee said he believed this issue was for the participants to decide.

8. The Chairman said he wished to proceed first of all with a vote on a section by section basis. The UUP said it had understood the Chairman of the Business Committee to say that the issue was one for discussion among the participants. The UUP said it was very much of the mind that the motion be considered as a whole. The Chairman again proposed that Plenary vote on the motion on a section by section basis. This was agreed and undertaken. The introduction and paragraph 2(a) were agreed unanimously. Paragraph 2(b) was agreed by everyone except Sinn Féin who stated its intention to vote against 2(b).

9. Sinn Féin said it wished to congratulate everyone for reaching this point. It intended to support the procedural motion moving the process into substantive negotiations. The party was committed to inclusive negotiations. Sinn Féin said much of the focus of the motion was on decommissioning. It was about unionists trying to rework the words of the two Governments. It was also an attempt to retain decommissioning as a blockage to negotiations. Sinn Féin said it was against that. Therefore the party was voting against section 2(b). Given that preconditions to negotiations caused the collapse of the peace process in February 1996, Sinn Féin said it was clear all obstacles needed to be avoided. In particular, given its destructive effect, the decommissioning obstacle should not be resurrected either now or in the future. The removal of all guns from Irish politics was a clear objective of a lasting peace settlement. Given the importance of this objective the approach should be the one which was most likely to succeed rather than one which blocked and disrupted the wider negotiations which were based on the principle that nothing was agreed until everything was agreed. The issue of disarmament needed to be resolved but without blocking the negotiations.

10. Sinn Féin said it had already stated its willingness to address all aspects of the Report of the International Body in the context of its participation in inclusive negotiations. It would work with the Independent Commission in the context of its peace strategy and in the interest of advancing the peace process. The party was prepared to consider any proposals which addressed the need to take all the guns out of Irish politics and it would be putting forward, for consideration, proposals on this issue.

11. Sinn Féin said it was worth noting that the two Governments had acknowledged their responsibility to carry the process forward without blocking negotiations and that decommissioning could not be imposed as a pre-condition or as an absolute obligation but required the co-operation of those in possession of weapons. On the issue of consent, Sinn Féin said it wanted to see a settlement that sought and won the consent of all sections of the people. Consent was a two way street. It was up to the unionists, whose leadership it welcomed at the table this evening, and the British Government to win nationalist consent in the same way as the party sought to win their consent. This was especially pertinent for the unionists at this time.

12. Sinn Féin said everyone had seen how the unionists had used the issue of consent. For example, in their press statement of 17 September 1997 they claimed that 'both Governments had now accepted that the principle of consent would apply to all aspects of the talks and any agreements emerging therefrom'. Sinn Féin said it did not think that any party present, with the exception of the unionists, would go along with this notion in that unqualified form. Sinn Féin said its view was that consent needed to be put in an all Ireland context which meant bringing about a radical transformation of the situation by ending partition and British

jurisdiction. It accepted that other parties had a different view. The nationalist parties agreed that an internal settlement was not a solution. The Framework Document indicated an all Ireland settlement was required.

13. Sinn Féin said it looked forward to putting to the other participants its republican analysis and its vision for a new Ireland, united and democratic and at peace. It also looked forward to listening to the views of the others, especially the unionists. Everyone's shared responsibility now was to make peace a reality.

14. The Chairman formally asked for a vote on paragraph 2(b). The British Government, Irish Government, Alliance, Labour, NIWC, PUP, SDLP, UDP and UUP voted for. Sinn Féin voted against. The Chairman declared that paragraph 2(b) had gained sufficient consensus and was therefore approved. Moving on, paragraph 2(c) was agreed unanimously. Paragraphs 3, 4 and 5, taken as separate paragraphs, were agreed unanimously.

15. The Chairman reflected that all sections of the procedural motion except paragraph 2(b) had been agreed unanimously by the participants. He then asked whether the procedural motion in all its various parts was now formally accepted and agreed. The participants signified their agreement to this statement. The Chairman said he now wished to ask the Chairman of the Business Committee to make an announcement.

16. The Chairman of the Business committee said that, given that the agenda for the opening Plenary session had been completed, he wished to convene a meeting of the Business Committee as soon as possible. He outlined his intention to circulate to participants a

memorandum listing three issues to be taken by the Business Committee, namely; (a) the Alliance Party recommendation that media be admitted to sessions of the Strand negotiations; (b) the clarification of when a participant in the talks was no longer a participant. (The rules were silent on this issue, although rule 23 anticipated that participants might withdraw temporarily or permanently.) The Chairman of the Business Committee said this item may be superseded by the participants' opinions requested by Senator Mitchell in response to a query concerning the distribution of minutes to a participant who had withdrawn from the talks. The third item was confirmation of schedules for the Strand talks (rules 11 and 14).

17. The Chairman of the Business Committee said he proposed to suggest to participants that his staff be told of any further agenda items by 14.00 on Monday, 29 September. In addition, any change of Business Committee representatives should be submitted by that time. The Chairman said he wished to ask for the agreement of participants as to when to hold a Business Committee meeting. Early options were 16.00 on 29 September or 10.00 on 30 September.

18. The Chairman asked for comments. The UUP said it would be helpful if a complete list of agenda items could be circulated to participants after 14.00 on Monday to enable consideration to be given to each topic. On that basis the UUP believed it might be more prudent not to have the Business Committee meeting before 10.00 on Tuesday. This was agreed unanimously.

19. The Chairman said the agenda for the opening Plenary session had now been completed and he wished to make some closing remarks. Sinn Féin intervened to raise the issue of the UUP indictment and the Governments' determination which had been circulated prior to

the Plenary commencing. The party said that, it had had only a short time to review it, but it was glad that the indictment had been dismissed by the two Governments. The party had been present in the talks for two weeks and had two indictments placed against it. It hoped this wouldn't occur every week. Sinn Féin said it was present at the talks representing its electorate and it hoped everyone could now proceed to do this during the substantive negotiations.

20. The Chairman said that the issue of the UUP indictment and the two Governments' determination had already been disposed of and was no longer a matter for the Plenary. Moving on, the Chairman said that in terms of closing remarks, the Chairman (Senator Mitchell) had made a statement which he would circulate to all participants. Both he and the Chairman of the Business committee fully endorsed Senator Mitchell's remarks. The Chairman said that with the preliminary agenda now finally completed, full credit went to the participants in the process for achieving this. It did not diminish the magnitude of what had been accomplished to acknowledge the even greater difficulties which lay ahead. These didn't involve rules of procedure or preliminary agendas. They involved the ultimately critical issues of how the people of Northern Ireland could live together, in peace and reconciliation.

21. The Chairman said that on a personal note he wished to add that when he first came to Northern Ireland its people had a dream of peace, stability and reconciliation. Now that the process had moved to this stage, he hoped that peace would become a reality. Both he, Senator Mitchell and General de Chastelain remained fully committed to facilitating an agreement which produced peace, political stability and reconciliation. All three recognised that the participants and the two Governments faced the challenge and

responsibility of reaching a lasting settlement for the people of Northern Ireland. It was up to everyone to work together to achieve this.

22. With these closing comments, the Chairman concluded the opening Plenary session at 21.52.

Independent Chairmen Notetakers
29 September 1997

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