

DRAFT SUMMARY RECORD OF OPENING PLENARY SESSION - until Monday
TUESDAY 10 DECEMBER 1996 (12.10)

Those present:

Independent Chairmen	Government Teams	Parties
Mr Holkeri	British Government	Alliance Party
General de Chastelain	Irish Government	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) called the meeting to order at 12.10. The minutes of the three previous meetings on 2 and 3 December were approved without amendments. The Chairman said that as anticipated, the Independent Chairmen had held meetings with all of the delegations in bilateral format to discuss the question of whether the Chairmen should attempt to draw up a proposal on the handling of decommissioning, and if so, what the delegations would like to see contained in it. It had been agreed that the Chairmen should act accordingly and that the development of such a proposal should not conflict with the continuing bilateral contacts which were already under way. The Chairman said that, while there seemed to be a desire among all delegations to reach a consensus in the matter before the Christmas break, it was apparent from preliminary soundings that no formula existed which was likely to produce such consensus at this stage. Accordingly, he proposed that the Chairmen should continue with their efforts this week against the background of continuing bilateral/trilateral next week even if extended time were necessary and yet the party

meetings and that the Plenary meeting should adjourn until Monday 16, December at 12 noon.

2. The UUP said that it was slightly nonplussed by the proposal. It thought that there was little prospect of reaching an agreement on the matter in such a short timescale. Furthermore, vital business was due to take place in Parliament next week including a vote on fisheries which could mean a defeat for the Government. This required the attendance of some of the parties, and it might not be possible to have full representation at a Plenary meeting.

3. The SDLP said it was broadly in agreement with the Chairman's proposal. It also said that at the outset of the talks it had been agreed by all the parties that they would field delegates who could speak authoritatively and who were empowered to act on their behalf. On that basis, the absence of any participant at a debate elsewhere should not prevent progress in the talks. The party said it would not favour a situation developing whereby the pace of the negotiations and the potential for agreement should be conditional on the presence or absence of members of certain delegations. This could delay prospects of movement on the mechanism for a liaison committee on decommissioning, finalising discussions on the Opening Plenary agenda and proceeding to the three stranded talks. Accordingly, the party said that the technical matter at hand should be concluded by next week to enable the parties to resume discussions after the Christmas break invigorated and inspired to move on to substantial negotiations.

4. The UKUP said that as to the positions adopted by the SDLP and the UUP, it felt it was caught between the twin perils of Scylla and Charybdis. It too wanted to come to a decision on the matter next week even if extended time were necessary and yet the party

had the smallest number of persons to call upon for representation at the talks and in Parliament. However, the UKUP thought that the participants were fooling themselves insofar as the real issue was concerned, because in reality they were all aware that after all the discussions to date and presentation of papers and proposals, they were still no closer to coming to a decision in relation to decommissioning. It was extremely unlikely that a consensus would be found between now and the next week. The UKUP also said that it was in favour of a determination but not in the manner as had been suggested by the SDLP. It was well known that the decision on an invitation to Sinn Fein to participate in the talks lay with the British Government. But if Sinn Fein were invited to participate in the talks without making a clear and unequivocal declaration of a complete and permanent cease-fire, accompanied by the handing over of some weapons, the UKUP would not remain in the talks. It was necessary, the UKUP said, to determine the principle that only parties who were committed to democratic procedures had the right to sit down with the other parties in the talks. It was doubtful if this could happen by next week but hope springs eternal. The UKUP also said it was worried by the constant adjournments of the Plenary meeting into bilaterals when it was not evident that any progress was being made in such fora. Perhaps the UKUP was being kept in the dark on this matter, but if it was clear that progress was being made the party might be persuaded to take a different view. It was difficult otherwise to consent to the unknown. issue of decommissioning before the Christmas break. He was

5. Alliance said it was crucially important to have a determination in the matter before the Christmas break. The danger was that the talks would continue on in a fruitless search for a decision while events outside moved on. An example of that was the debate on the decommissioning legislation which might well be completed before the participants at the talks resolve the issues

before them. Accordingly, it was important to decide the issues sooner rather than later. If nothing fruitful was happening on Plenary, it was better to try to make progress in other formats. Alliance said it was disturbed that there seemed to be a lack of understanding that as time passed, the delegates might end up being bypassed by events and losing the initiative. The party expressed

6. The DUP for its part said it accepted the Chairman's report in relation to the lack of progress being reached thus far and that it was desirable for the Chairmen to have further meetings with the parties. The party said it would consider any proposal that was made to move the matter forward. The reality had to dawn that the crucial issue of decommissioning had to be determined. The Decommissioning Bill was debated in Parliament the previous evening and the DUP and others had emphasised that fact as well as the need for a programme of actual decommissioning which involved the surrender of illegal weapons. As to the point made earlier by the SDLP, the DUP said that in 1992 decisions that had been reached to were subsequently set aside and it was important that delegates at the talks should be mandated to take decisions that would be binding.

7. The Chairman intervened to say that in the earlier discussions with the parties, most had expressed the wish that a serious attempt should be made to reach an accommodation on the difficult issue of decommissioning before the Christmas break. He was prepared therefore to proceed as proposed and adjourn the meeting until Monday next.

8. The UUP then asked whether the meeting had agreed this course and raised the question of a vote being taken on the proposal. Its spokesman said that he personally was opposed to an adjournment of

the Plenary to next week. The SDLP sought clarification of the position. It wondered whether the UUP spokesman was speaking for the party on the issue. The SDLP accepted the Chairman's ruling that the Plenary stood adjourned. The SDLP then said it wished to raise an additional matter and it referred to the illness of the leader of the Labour delegation (Mr M Curran). The party expressed its sympathy and good wishes for a speedy recovery and it also extended similar good wishes to a member of the DUP delegation (Mr N Dodds) over the illness of his son. All parties were associated with these comments. Mr Casey replied with appreciation for these sentiments on behalf of Labour.

9. The Chairman said that the UUP wished to see the Plenary adjourn for Christmas at that stage, but all other parties had expressed support for his suggestion to continue to try to find an accommodation before Christmas. He suggested an adjournment of 20 minutes to consider the position. The UUP said that that was not necessary because the UUP was alone in its view and it was open to the Chairman to make a ruling himself on the issue. The Chairman replied that he felt it better to operate on the basis of unanimity, and as there seemed to be a slight misunderstanding between himself and the UUP in the matter, a short adjournment might facilitate a resolution. The UUP referred to the fact that the Forum was winding up on Friday 13, December; that some delegates to the talks would be committed to business in Parliament next week and that the decommissioning issue was so vitally important that an agreement on it by next week was not a runner.

10. Alliance said that adjournments of the Plenary were matters for the Chairman and that it was not necessary to obtain sufficient consensus. Furthermore, if decommissioning was of such paramount importance it followed necessarily that other matters had to take

