

DRAFT SUMMARY RECORD OF OPENING PLENARY SESSION -
WEDNESDAY 26 FEBRUARY 1997 (10.10)

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 10.10 and sought approval of the draft record of 19 February.

Previous Minutes (19 February)

2. The UKUP drew the Chairman's attention to a minor amendment on page 5, paragraph 8, line 9 where it stated that the UKUP (in brackets) should read UUP. The UKUP said that in highlighting this correction, it wished to take the opportunity of pointing out that in a News Letter article on 21 September 1996, of which the party would make copies available to other participants, remarks had been made by the UUP leader to the effect that his party intended to fully implement the Mitchell Report. The UKUP said that the article did not just contain a reference to the Mitchell Principles, nor of partial implementation of these, but rather full implementation of the complete document. The UKUP said that if this didn't constitute a definitive policy statement on behalf of

the UUP, then it didn't know what did. The Chairman, on hearing no objections accepted the amendment.

3. The UKUP raised a further amendment in relation to page 11, paragraph 20, line 13. It proposed that the sentence should read "it was the refusal of the UUP to totally capitulate to the demands of the SDLP and the pan-nationalist front that was holding up the matter." On hearing no objections, the Chairman accepted this amendment and approved the record for 19 February on this basis.

4. Moving on, the Chairman said that over the past few weeks, the Independent Chairmen, at the request of participants, had explored the possibility of a compromise solution which would allow the negotiations to achieve some agreement in respect of item 2 on the agenda for the remainder of the opening plenary. In carrying out this request, numerous meetings had been held with the participants and, by invitation, the Chairmen had sat in on various meetings between parties and groups of parties. These discussions had been lengthy and detailed and had demonstrated considerable good will and effort among the participants. As a result, the Chairmen had obtained a better understanding of the views of all the participants, and the participants themselves had gained a clearer insight into each other's concerns. Nevertheless, despite the efforts of all concerned, the Chairman said that he, regretfully, had to report that, while some areas of potential convergence had been identified, no basis had yet emerged for agreement in respect of conclusions on agenda item 2.

5. In these circumstances, the Chairman said that he and his colleagues proposed to hold further consultations with the participants over the coming days in order to gauge their views on what further steps would best serve the negotiating process. In

doing so, he stated that all three Chairmen would be conscious of the fact that the Easter holiday period was approaching and that this would be followed by a General Election in the United Kingdom and by District Council elections in Northern Ireland. The Chairman said he therefore wished to invite the participants to reflect on the implications for the negotiations of this set of circumstances and to provide the chair with the benefit of their views on this and other matters in relation to the future of the negotiations during the next series of meetings. The Chairman said that in the light of this proposal he would propose to adjourn the Plenary meeting until 12 noon on Wednesday 5 March when the Chair would report on its soundings with participants and, if appropriate, bring forward proposals on the way forward. The Chairman said he wished to ask participants for their views on this proposal and asked the UDP to begin the tour de table.

6. The UDP stated that it would reluctantly go along with the Chair's proposal. The party said it had hoped that discussions in both groups (trilateral and parallel) would have brought progress. While some progress had been made within the parallel group, the party said it would like to have achieved more, but no overall progress had been made. The UDP said it did, however, agree with the Chair's comments that discussions needed to be held with parties with regard to the planning of any adjournment in the circumstances previously outlined. In this regard the party was happy to consult with the Chairmen and convey its views on the matter.

7. The DUP said it didn't believe it was unreasonable for the delegates to decide when to rise for Easter or for a general election. The party was on record previously as saying that it didn't believe that a future general election should be used as a

barrier in the process but rather that the process should continue right up until the date the election was announced. The DUP said that further to this, it remained of the view that there were a number of proposals which had been presented by individual parties as well as groups of parties, some of which were apparently 90% agreed, which should be the subject of a full plenary discussion. The party said it could not understand the policy of continuous weekly adjournments when the plenary should be holding a full discussion on these proposals. The DUP said it had got to the stage when it was becoming difficult to remember the last time a full discussion was held on any business relevant to the agenda. The party said a determination on the various proposals was required. It wished to hear the arguments advanced in relation to the Alliance/SDLP/UUP document which was now in the public arena and which, inter alia, was promoting the proposal of dealing with decommissioning by way of a sub-committee.

8. The other issue, according to the DUP, was the handling of its proposals on decommissioning which had been on the table for some months. The party was in favour of reaching a determination on these if only from the view point that it was surely proper for a delegation to find out whether its proposals found favour with others or not. The DUP said it believed that some of its decommissioning proposals would gain consensus. However it appeared that some of the participants wished to dodge these and postpone any deliberation of them until some months from now.

9. The UKUP said that its view of the continuing policy of the adjournments was already on the record. The party said that if the plenary was to be adjourned, as seemed possible, it wished to put on record its desire to do business with the trilateral group. For this to happen, the party said that all papers from the group must

be made available in order to make full use of the coming week. If this was possible and business could be conducted through arranged meetings, an independent record of those discussions should be made. The UKUP said that, like the DUP, it believed it would be useful to have its proposals, which encapsulated the UUP's proposals of 12 November 1996, put to a plenary for a vote. The party said it was disappointed that the principles of democratic procedure had been diminished so much that a consensus was required to decide whether or not to take a vote. The UKUP said that it seemed only proper that by next week a vote should be taken on its proposals.

10. The UUP said that the Chairman's report was disappointing in so far as the process hadn't made the progress which the participants would have liked. The party said that it had made one suggestion at its meeting with the Chairman the previous day and it hoped that this could be given serious consideration. As to the earlier comments in relation to the party's position within the trilateral group and its support of a sub-committee proposal, the UUP said that its position on decommissioning remained exactly as set out in its paper dated 12 November 1996.

11. The British Government said it shared the participants' disappointment on the lack of progress emanating from the discussions. It noted, with some satisfaction, however, that some positive developments had occurred but regretted that these were insufficient in order to make further progress. With this position in mind, the British Government said it accepted and endorsed the Chair's proposal.

12. The Irish Government said it had listened carefully to the Chair's earlier remarks and supported the proposal. It also stated

that its decommissioning legislation had now completed its passage through both Houses and only awaited signature by the President to become law.

13. Alliance said it wished to go along with the Chair's proposal. The party said it was disappointed about the lack of progress. It had, however, one suggestion. The party said that it believed some of the time spent in the talks process could be used in a more productive manner if the issue of the handling of parades could be discussed by the participants. Alliance said it welcomed the Head of the Orange Order's statement that day pointing out that it was essential to avoid a repeat of last year's troubles following the Drumcree stand-off. The party said that the margin of the talks process could offer a productive platform in permitting participants to become involved in dialogue in an attempt to avoid repetition of last year's disturbances.

14. Labour said it also shared the disappointment of others, but it wished to thank the Chairman and his colleagues for all their efforts to date. Labour said it supported the Chair's proposal. The NIWC stated that it supported the Chair's proposal. The PUP said it wasn't happy to go along with the Chair's proposal but, in the circumstances, it would support it for the moment.

15. The SDLP said it shared the Chairmen's view that there was no evidence of any commitment to deal with the real issues. The party said it was minded of two things. There were matters which were reserved for the two Governments and there were matters for the talks to deal with. Looking at the latter, the party said it was looking at the collective failure of the process to deal with these matters. It said it would agree to go along with the Chair's proposal in the hope that there might be sufficient realism to

allow the Chair to report differently next week. However the party wished to pose a question - did anyone really believe that future meetings up to next week would close the gaps which existed? The party said that everyone had to be honest; the gaps were widening rather than closing. The SDLP said that the participants were present at the process to strike deals not political postures in advance of an election. The party said it hoped that the time between now and the next plenary could be used constructively. The party would do all it could to help in this but the real question was whether the will to make progress was present in all the participants.

16. The DUP said that it had made its position clear last week in relation to the repeated adjournments of the plenary. It was not in favour of them as there was business on the table to be determined. Alliance/UUP/SDLP had said they had prepared a document which was 90% agreed between them. However, it seemed that they wanted to keep the other parties in the dark about it. "Lodge meetings" were taking place and the other parties were being excluded. The DUP said participants were not allowed to discuss, examine, and vote on proposals. Everybody knows that adjournments are a waste of time. The SDLP had called for honesty. The fact was that putting things off would stymie the whole process.

17. The DUP also remarked that it did not like the talk by the British Government about the suspension of the talks as it suited the SDLP and both Governments to destroy the Forum. Alliance were now going to boycott a committee of the Forum. The DUP said it wanted to know what was in the minds of both Governments today on the matter; it had had enough of adjournments. It was time to hear further about the wonderful agreement between the UUP, SDLP, and Alliance which was almost 90% agreed. The DUP also maintained that

there was no need to stop the Forum for the elections. Such a move to bring about the destruction of the Forum would be highly resented by the people at large, particularly as it would be seen as interference by the Irish Government in the affairs of Northern Ireland. The DUP said it took a very serious view of the whole situation and it seemed to it that there was no point in participating in the talks at all: they were a farce. It was time to be honest and realistic about the matter and come to a real decision on it. The DUP said it regretted Senator Mitchell's absence which presupposes that the whole process was tied in with his movements and no decisions would be taken until he returned.

18. The DUP then turned to the remarks made by Alliance in relation to parades. It was flabbergasted at the party's audacity in the matter. The position was that there was an elected Forum with a standing committee to deal with the issue. Now Alliance wanted to boycott that committee and raise the matter in plenary at the negotiations. That was absurd, the DUP said. The fact was that Alliance had boycotted a committee which had abided by a decision which had in fact been proposed by an Alliance committee member.

19. Alliance responded by saying that the reasons why it had left the standing committee of the Forum were well known. It also said that there seemed to be some confusion on the DUP's position on the question posed by the Chairman, as the party had earlier indicated that it was happy to go along with the proposal regarding a further adjournment. The DUP reacted strongly saying that this was nonsense. It wondered whether Alliance was awake or not.

20. The UKUP said it wanted to address the principles of democracy which seemed to be wondrously absent from the minds of

Alliance. The decision in relation to parades was taken democratically in the standing committee with Alliance representation. An Alliance member had proposed a cut off time for the receipt of representations from interested groups in the matter. Three attempts were made to obtain representations from a particular group who then responded outside of the time limit and with certain conditions. The UKUP said that Alliance seemed to agree with democratic principles when they got the result they wanted. When they didn't get the desired result, they indulged in boycott and ran to the plenary session of the Forum to cry foul in an irregular way. Having failed in that attempt, they then tried to bring this issue which is not on any agenda, before the plenary session of the talks. The UKUP said that Alliance should abide by the rules of the democratic game.

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21. The DUP said it deeply resented what Alliance had said, that the party should keep its ears open and that this type of shenanigans by Alliance was well known. The fact was that the electorate had rejected them and the party had come decimated to the talks. Alliance had helped to drive the SDLP out of the Forum and its leader had engaged in a vicious attack on the DUP. As to the question of adjournments, the DUP reiterated its opposition to these. There was business to be conducted in the talks. Alliance was a party to a document which was substantially agreed, the DUP said, yet it wasn't prepared to have that document discussed. The DUP stressed that it wanted to go on in plenary session; the business to be dealt with was decommissioning. As to the legislation in that matter, the DUP said it could only be regarded as a terrorists' charter. That was clear from the previous night's debate in the House of Lords and the remarks made by Baroness Denton. There was outrage in Northern Ireland in the matter. The DUP also said that at the House of Lords the argument was that the

legislation would never be used, so why waste parliamentary time debating it.

22. The PUP said that this particular debate was interesting, but it was time to get back to the question of the adjournment. The UUP said it wished to note that Alliance had actually come out in support of the Orange Order.

23. At that point (10.48) the Chairman, noting that the DUP did not agree with his proposal, ruled that the plenary stood adjourned until 12.00 noon on Wednesday 5 March, 1997.

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