

Office of the Independent Chairmen

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MEETING OF LIAISON SUBCOMMITTEE ON DECOMMISSIONING WEDNESDAY 8 OCTOBER 1997 (12.03)

CHAIRMEN:

Senator Mitchell
Mr Holkeri

THOSE PRESENT:

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 (Senator Mitchell) convened the meeting and noted that this was the first meeting of the Liaison Subcommittee on decommissioning, established pursuant to the Procedural Motion adopted by the Plenary on 24 September. He then read out the remit of the Liaison Subcommittee as set out in Article 2(c) (2) of that Motion. The Chairman recalled that the Business Committee had that morning agreed that membership of the Liaison Subcommittee would be set at two members plus two support staff for the parties, and two members plus three support staff for the Governments, and that it had been agreed that members did not have to be elected representatives.
2. The Chairman noted that the two Governments had no proposals for legislation or regulations pending at the moment, and said that copies of the

measures already enacted would be distributed to delegations. The Chairman of the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning had advised him that the Commission hoped to have proposals for schemes of decommissioning ready for examination towards the end of the month. The Chairman therefore proposed, after giving the parties an opportunity to make some opening remarks, to adjourn the meeting to the call of the chair, pending the receipt of the Commission's proposals.

3. The British Government was represented at official level, but said it might be represented at Ministerial level at future meetings. The Government felt that decommissioning, in line with the recommendations in the Mitchell report, was an indispensable part of the peace process. Confidence Building Measures were being discussed elsewhere, but the potential of progress on decommissioning to enhance confidence was profound and indisputable. The British Government did not underestimate the difficulties involved, and recognised that decommissioning was necessarily voluntary. It felt, however, that some decommissioning during negotiations would be an exceptionally important boost to confidence in the process.

4. The British Government outlined the legislative background. The Northern Ireland Arms Decommissioning Act 1997 laid the framework within which decommissioning could happen, and included provisions for an amnesty to cover decommissioning and limits on forensic testing and use in evidence of decommissioned arms. The Agreement establishing the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning was signed by the two Governments on 26 August and General de Chastelain was appointed to chair the Commission on 24 September.

5. The British Government said that the two Governments had provided the practical resources, and the appropriate legal immunities and privileges, which the Commission will require in its operation. The Commission had been briefed by security experts, and was now engaged in considering schemes for decommissioning. This Subcommittee will need to work closely with the Commission. The Government hoped that positive and rapid progress could be made on the work before the Subcommittee.

6. The Irish Government was also represented at official level, and also said that it might at future meetings be represented at Ministerial level. The Government recalled the joint statement of the Taoiseach and the Prime Minister on 15 September, which had made it clear that both Governments saw the resolution of the decommissioning issue as an indispensable part of the peace process. Both Governments remained totally committed to the implementation of the Mitchell Report in all its aspects, and looked to all parties to work constructively and in good faith in this Subcommittee to that end. Both Governments are aware of the difficulties and of the essentially voluntary nature of decommissioning, but both would like to see some decommissioning of arms during negotiations, which would be a major contribution to confidence-building.

7. The Irish Government said that the legal framework had been established in the Decommissioning Act 1997 in Ireland and the Northern Ireland Arms Decommissioning Act 1997 in the UK, and in the Agreement setting up the Independent Commission. Regulations had been made governing the operation of the Commission and conferring the necessary legal immunities and privileges, and the Chairman and members of the Commission had been appointed. Political and security briefings had been provided to the Commission.

8. Alliance said it was very important that the guns be taken out of the community forever, both as a confidence building measure and because even if the peace process was successful, there was a fear that guns which remained at large could be misused in the future. Inevitably there was distrust among the parties to this process. It should be seen not as a matter of surrender or humiliation, but as solving a critical common problem. Alliance fully supported the recommendations in the Mitchell Report, and had published its own paper on this subject.
9. Alliance said the parties would be relying on the judgement of the Independent Commission to help devise the best way of moving forward. This was a complicated area, with many modalities and practicalities to be worked out. All parties would have to engage honestly in the task. Alliance expected to see some decommissioning during the negotiations. The party suggested it might be useful to receive a detailed briefing from the Governments on the legislative framework described earlier. The Chairman agreed with this and said he would schedule a briefing.
10. Labour encouraged the constructive engagement of all parties in the process, and looked forward to the proposals of the Independent Commission. NIWC wished to place on record the debt the parties owed to the continuing commitment of the three Chairmen. The party was delighted that the obstacle which decommissioning had formed to the entire process had been overcome. The party had also tabled a paper on this issue. NIWC supported the Mitchell Report and its findings. It was true, as had been said before, that mindsets need to be decommissioned as well if decommissioning of weapons is ever to take place. All parties present had lost members or friends or relatives in the violence. NIWC also said the high level of legally held weapons in Northern Ireland was also an

important issue, even if it was not in the remit of this Subcommittee. Northern Ireland had the highest rate of domestic homicide in Europe, due largely to the availability of arms in the community.

11. The PUP said it agreed in principle with the removal of war materials from the situation. It was not yet clear how and when this could take place, but there was no doubt about the principle. The party said actual decommissioning was only likely to come about when there was some trust about where the process was going, and the key issues therefore were how to move forward, and what agreements could be reached that would build the necessary confidence and trust.

12. Sinn Fein said it was committed to total disarmament and demilitarisation. All guns should be removed - British, unionist, loyalist and republican, and this should be dealt with in the context of the negotiations and confidence building measures. The party said it would address all aspects of the Mitchell Report in that context. Sinn Fein was prepared to address any proposals for decommissioning, and would be putting forward its own proposals. The party said that decommissioning would involve the voluntary co-operation of the bodies which held the guns, and the task was to create the confidence which would make them ready to do so.

13. The SDLP said that the meeting of the Liaison Subcommittees sent out an important signal that all aspects of the negotiations are now under way, and the party anticipated rapid progress in decommissioning as well as the three strands. Taking the gun out of Irish politics is a slogan with a long history of the party, but perhaps never before had there been such a prospect of achieving this. The SDLP expressed the hope that those with the capacity to decommission and those with the

capacity to influence and encourage would accept responsibility in this respect. Many hopes were riding on the work here, but alongside hope was suspicion, and the SDLP understood the fears of those who doubted that all parties had a real commitment to decommissioning.

14. The UDP said that the Subcommittee was concerned only with the removal of illegal weapons. Decommissioning was a very serious issue, and the party would be contributing to the work of the Subcommittee. Detailed analysis of the issue could be made at a later meeting, but the UDP reminded the meeting that while the arsenals of the main paramilitary groups, which were currently observing cease-fires, did not pose an immediate threat to society, there were other armed groups not involved in the process and not on cease-fires who do pose such a real and immediate threat. This was likely to have an important bearing on the process.

15. The UUP welcomed the establishment of the Independent Commission. Complete disarmament of all illegal organisations was an indispensable element to bring about normality in Northern Ireland, and the party would do everything in its power to bring this about.

16. The Chairman adjourned the meeting to the call of the Chair at 12.41. The Chairman would call the next meeting of the Liaison Subcommittee after receiving the recommendations of the Independent Commission.

**Independent Chairmen Notetakers
13 October 1997**