

TALKS BULLETIN

15 OCTOBER 1996

Yesterday, the Talks in the morning and afternoon were taken up with bilaterals, principally with the DUP, UKUP and SDLP, regarding the agenda for the remainder of the opening plenary session.

In our initial meeting, the SDLP were to report back their leadership's view as to the ideas put to their delegation last Wednesday. This they did and they produced a document which gave their proposal as to the agenda. We were reasonably satisfied that they had taken on board our concerns about the importance of decommissioning, that discussion of proposals on decommissioning would not be confined alone to those proposals in the Mitchell Report and that discussion of the comprehensive agenda would follow discussion and agreement on decommissioning.

However, when we met with the DUP, they wanted to make it explicit that 'all' proposals would be open for discussion and that discussion on the comprehensive (three-stranded) agenda would follow agreement on decommissioning. They also put forward a spurious point about word-order in Item 4 of the proposed agenda; spurious because the establishment of decommissioning mechanisms and the launch of the three-stranded talks is intended to be simultaneous.

Although we were satisfied, we suggested that the DUP argue it out with the SDLP. They came back empty-handed. We then met with the SDLP ourselves and pressured them into compromise and accept that discussion of the comprehensive agenda would follow agreement on decommissioning. We agreed verbally that all proposals would be acceptable in the discussion of decommissioning.

The Plenary resumed to agree the agenda. The DUP and UKUP filibustered and introduced procedural objections. During this period, all the other participants gave their agreement to propose the draft agenda agreed between ourselves and the SDLP. It was agreed that the DUP and UKUP should be allowed to submit amendments which they did. Their amendments would never have received the agreement of the SDLP and would have prolonged the period before we could deal with the critical issue of decommissioning, perhaps forever. Rather than object, the UUP gave pro-active leadership to allow decommissioning to be discussed and agreed so that the opportunity afforded to us by Sinn Fein/IRA's actions and self-imposed exclusion from the Talks could be exploited.

As has been seen today, the DUP and UKUP criticisms were baseless. The circulation of proposals on the comprehensive agenda which was allowed before decommissioning was debated was completed in exactly 30 minutes. The debate on decommissioning was then underway as we wanted. The DUP and, more particularly the UKUP, would have held back this debate indefinitely and kept the door open for Sinn Fein/IRA in the event of a ceasefire and a weak response from HMG. Their position would have put the UVF/UDA in the same position as the IRA and made no distinction between the relatively disciplined 2 year-old loyalist ceasefire and the consistently murderous activities of the IRA as evidenced in Lisburn last week. The irony is that the DUP concerns have been met and the difference between the agenda agreed this morning and the proposal of the UKUP of 25 July is minimal. Indeed, on 25 July the UKUP spoke of 'discussion of proposals' rather than 'discussion of all proposals' which was their main bone of contention last night!

Enclosed is a copy of the agenda agreed by 9 participants this morning, the UUP's proposed comprehensive agenda which crucially mentions 'constitutional issues' rather than 'the constitutional position of Northern Ireland' as the Governments' sought to have discussed and ensures that any Strand 3 relationship is between the Republic and the United Kingdom and not simply between the London and Dublin Governments which would not allow us to open up the Anglo-Irish agreement for discussion, and a copy of our press statement immediately after agreement on the opening plenary agenda was reached.