

PLENARY, 27 JANUARY: HMG'S OPENING REMARKS

1. I should like to begin by welcoming you, Senator, back to Northern Ireland; and welcoming everyone to this first plenary session of 1997.
2. I am glad to have the opportunity to set out my reflections on the situation which confronts us. Some of the reflections I have had over the past few weeks have been sombre, but others have been relatively positive.
3. To take the sombre reflections first, we have seen the tempo of the renewed IRA campaign in Northern Ireland quicken and strengthen. Vicious and deadly attacks, intended to kill and maim, have been made with increasing frequency and variety. The attack involving Nigel Dodds was typical in its demonstration of the IRA's cynical exploitation of what was already a trying time for Mr Dodds and his wife, and its callous disregard of the potential consequences of unleashing lethal violence within a hospital for sick children. Fortunately, the attack was also typical in that it failed to achieve its objective, foiled - like so many others - by the alertness and skill of the security forces. The IRA's decision to revert to the failed tactic of terrorism is immoral, counterproductive in terms of its declared objectives and serves to show that the Republican Movement has at this time rejected the opportunity to make a constructive contribution to the cause of political stability and lasting peace in Northern Ireland. The renewed terrorist campaign cannot succeed but in the meanwhile the threat it poses to life, limb and property in Northern Ireland is a very real one.
4. Second, there is worrying evidence that the Loyalist ceasefire is, at best, under considerable strain. We may return to this point in a moment, but for now I simply want

to register the potentially serious consequences for ordinary decent people in Northern Ireland if the Loyalist paramilitary organisations were to drop the restraint which they have observed in since October 1994. We could easily see an escalation of sickening tit for tat murders as each side sought to devise a spurious justification from the other's horrifying brutality.

5. My third sombre reflection is that in the discussions which the British Government has had with all the parties and with the Irish Government over the past two weeks there is very little sign of anyone being prepared to move away from the firm positions of principle they all hold on the issue of decommissioning. As we must complete our "address" to the issue of decommissioning before we can finalise the comprehensive agenda and launch the substantive political negotiations that means we continue to face a serious obstacle, which might indeed become a stalemate.
6. However, you will be pleased to hear, Mr Chairman, that not all my reflections have been so gloomy.
7. Over the past two weeks in particular the British Government team has detected a widespread realisation of the urgent need to demonstrate that there is a valid and effective democratic alternative to the paths of violence, terrorism and intimidation.
8. That has been matched by a growing determination, on the part of most of the parties we have spoken to and of the Irish Government, to join us in seeking to make real progress in these talks at the earliest possible moment. The Prime Minister was quoted last week as having reiterated his determination to devote as much time and energy to Northern Ireland after the election as he has done to date; but that does not imply that the British Government expects

no progress before the election - quite the reverse. We will be working to secure significant forward movement at the earliest possible moment, and we are delighted that so many of our fellow participants are of the same mind.

9. The third positive reflection I should like to share with colleagues is that, whatever the difficulties we currently face, we are at least on the right path. These negotiations give us the opportunity to reach a functioning political accommodation which would provide the best basis for long term stability and lasting peace in Northern Ireland. All the participants in these negotiations have objectives which can only be achieved in discussions which - as provided for in our rules of procedure - address all the main sets of relationships and all issues of real concern to each participant. This process has the potential to enable each participant to achieve its basic objectives, while protecting its fundamental interests. It has the capacity to produce a shared understanding on constitutional issues, new political institutions for Northern Ireland with real powers, a vastly improved relationship between the two parts of Ireland and a new and more broadly based Agreement. All that would contribute immensely to the permanent end of terrorism. It does no harm, from time to time, to lift our eyes from the stony path we are on, to see where we are heading.
10. My final positive reflection arises from the detail of the various discussions which the British Government team have had over the past two weeks. There do seem to me to be a few chinks of light which may indicate the potential for a measure of agreement on the sensitive and difficult subject of decommissioning. Given the renewed determination to make progress which I alluded to earlier, it would certainly be wrong to conclude that we cannot make further progress on this issue over the coming days and weeks, and move towards substantive negotiations in the three strands.

11. I know that before we broke for Christmas you, Senator, announced that you and your colleagues would be exploring the potential for agreement on item 2 of our agenda and considering whether it would be appropriate for you to bring forward proposals under rule 30(a). We would be very pleased to share our own assessment with you, as we continue to explore the scope for agreement on certain details with relevant participants.
12. I shall be interested to hear others' reflections, but for our part the British Government intends to propose a further intensive period of bilateral discussions during which we will continue to explore the scope for reaching an early determination in respect of item 2 at least of our agenda.
13. I do not wish to understate the difficulties we face but I am confident that with sufficient will and determination we can make progress in these talks. Certainly the necessary will and determination will not be lacking on the part of the British Government: we will be doing all that we can to assist progress.