

Northern Ireland Negotiations

Str1(97)1st Mtg

STRAND ONE, FIRST MEETING
7 October 1997

MINUTES

The meeting to launch Strand One of the Talks process commenced at 10.10 am with Mr Murphy in the chair. **Mr Murphy**, welcoming the participants, drew attention to the British Government's dual role as Chairman and participant, and expressed a determination to act impartially. He proposed, as had been agreed by the Business Committee, that there should be an opening round of statements, followed by a brief discussion of procedural matters.

Sinn Féin recorded their formal opposition to the UK Government acting as Chairman of Strand One. **The Chairman** replied that the Rules of Procedure had been agreed some time ago and would be difficult to change. He reiterated that the British Government would act entirely impartially in its Chairmanship role.

The PUP expressed support for UK Chairmanship.

Opening Statements

The Chairman then invited the parties to make opening statements. All except the PUP and the UUP read from prepared texts, which have been circulated.

The PUP expressed a willingness to consider the ideas of others and would set out their own views on the positive elements of the Unionist position. The objective of the process should be to create a united community in Northern Ireland based on the politics of inclusion.

The UUP did not speak to their text, but circulated it separately. They expressed regret that not all parties were present. They suggested that the present process was

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evidence that attempting to secure political change through violence had failed. The process could only succeed if all parties recognised that the fundamental framework was maintenance of the Union. There were many areas of potential common ground on economic and social issues which the process should build on.

Procedural matters

The **Chairman** invited discussion on procedural matters set out in his letter to participants. There were alternative approaches to the scheduling of business: either a day a week for each Strand or blocks of time devoted to particular issues.

The **Alliance Party** argued that all three Strands should be kept moving concurrently. Concentrating on specific issues could produce early deadlock.

The **SDLP** urged moving quickly to the core issues rather than having set piece debates on general principles.

The **Chairman** suggested that advance circulation of short papers on general principles might avoid the need for protracted discussion.

The **Women's Coalition** asked for briefing on the results of the 1991/92 Talks. The **Chairman** replied that much agreed then was reflected in the Framework documents but further background could be provided if parties to those Talks agreed.

The **PUP** suggested that it should not be difficult to reach early agreement on Strand One issues in view of the groundwork which had been done in the 1991/92 Talks. The **UUP** disagreed. The present Talks should not look back to 1992 and it should not be assumed that agreements provisionally reached in 1992 were still valid. The **Chairman** suggested that, while anything agreed in 1992 was not binding, it nevertheless provided useful background for the present discussions.

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The UUP objected to the Chairman's suggestion that he might brief the Irish delegation "on a daily basis" about the proceedings in Strand One. The Chairman noted that his suggestion was informal and agreed to reconsider the matter.

Sinn Féin had no strong views on how business should be handled as long as the process moved quickly to the core issues. They expressed concern at the unwillingness of some parties to engage in discussion with them.

The Alliance Party expressed surprise at the UUP position regarding the 1992 Talks. Although nothing had been definitely agreed, a number of papers had been "banked" and much of the Framework text on Strand One issues had been based on that. The UUP replied that it was open to parties to revisit proposals from the earlier Talks, and said that elements had been added to the Frameworks text which were unacceptable to them.

Next Meeting

The Chairman concluded that Strand One might reconvene on Monday and Strand Two on Tuesday of next week, subject to what was agreed by the Business Committee *[Following the Business Committee's discussion on Wednesday, the next Strand One meeting will be held on Monday 13 October at 10.00 am]*. All sides clearly wished to move quickly to the core issues. One approach would be to take agenda items one at a time, on the basis of short papers from each of the participants, circulated in advance no later than noon on the preceding Friday.

He said that parties might submit papers on the agenda item 'Principles and Requirements', which could be discussed at the next meeting. [Parties have now been informed of arrangements for distribution of such papers this Friday].

Following a discussion on the principle of issuing a press communiqué after each meeting, a text was agreed summarising the proceedings in the following terms:

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The first meeting of Strand One of the talks took place in Castle Buildings today. Participants made opening statements, which they may circulate. They also discussed a number of matters relating to the conduct of the business of the Strands. They will meet again shortly to begin discussion of Principles and Requirements, the first item on the agreed Agenda.

STRAND ONE SECRETARIAT

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