

Alliance Party Submission on Senator Mitchell's Questions

26 June 1996

1) What is the status of the Ground Rules document (Cmnd. 3232)?

We view the Ground Rules document (Cmnd. 3232) as establishing the legal and political foundations upon which these negotiations are built.

Legally, as a result of the clear reference to it in Section 2 (1) of the Northern Ireland (Entry to Negotiations) Act, 1996, it provides the legal definition, and describes the character of these negotiations.

Politically, the Ground Rules arose out of consultation with the various parties concerned, and out of agreements between the two governments. To address the political requirements of various parties, the process to date has included: a very particular form of election; the establishment of the Northern Ireland Forum; the invitation of nomination of delegates to the Talks from the elected party teams; and the convening of the Talks, and invitations to be present, issued by the British and Irish governments. All these components have been essential features of the compromises which have formed the basis for these Talks. To attempt now to renegotiate the basis for the Talks would be likely to require a review of all aspects of the political agreement on which it was founded.

It is important to note that the context for this process is the political agreement between the two governments. It would be idle for other participants to assume that all participants around the table are equal in strength, significance or sufficiency. The implementation of the outcome of the Talks will of course also be a governmental responsibility.

2) How is the status of the Ground Rules affected by §7 of the document?

The status of the document as a whole is not affected by §7. Rather §7 is clear in its reference to "the conduct of the negotiations" (i.e. how the negotiations are managed, administered, and operated.). This can in no way be construed as permitting anything to be done in the negotiations which would have the effect of negating the Command Paper as a whole, but it clearly demonstrates the capacity to develop further rules for procedure, as we are now doing. We have a substantial discretion as to how we conduct our day to day business, provided that we proceed in a way which is broadly compatible with the outline proposed by the Ground Rules paper.

3) What are the essential features of the Ground Rules document?

We view the document **in its entirety** as constituting the legal and political foundation upon which the negotiations are built.