

Intervention on behalf of the Irish Government, delivered by Mr. Mervin Taylor T.D.,
Minister for Equality and Law Reform, 25 June 1996

Thank you Mr Chairman.

1. I am happy to introduce these proposed amendments on behalf of the Irish Government, and to endorse the reasons set out by Michael Ancram why we have put them forward.
2. I do so in the hope that they will be regarded as helpful by delegations and will facilitate rapid progress towards an agreed set of procedural rules.
3. I would recall for the meeting the wise words put forward at an earlier stage by the Alliance Party when they reminded us that the rules we are drafting are not for a Parliament, or a court of law, or a debating society. They are for negotiations, that is to say a framework to bring together vastly different, and in many cases conflicting interests, and to seek to reconcile them on a basis that is fair to all. Our rules of procedure must reflect that goal. They must ensure a fair hearing for all points of view. They must afford the Chairmen a clear basis to conduct business efficiently and to ensure a fair and unprejudiced hearing for all viewpoints.
4. There are, at the very outset, different perceptions of the relative status and application of the Ground-Rules paper, or, in terms of British Parliamentary procedure, Command Paper 3232
5. We have sought to address this problem by distinguishing two separate dimensions: the first is the overall structure of the negotiations, including their statutory basis and certain fundamental rules which are important not only because of the formal status of the Ground-Rules paper, but because they are so important to one or other delegation that, in practice, no negotiating process could be envisaged without them.
6. The second dimension is the internal conduct of the negotiations which, as paragraph 7 of the Ground-Rules paper itself envisages, is a matter to be worked out pragmatically by the participants.
7. To reconcile these two dimensions it is necessary to ensure that all of the aspects of the Ground-Rules paper relevant to the internal or procedural conduct of the negotiations should find appropriate expression in the new procedures paper. Conversely those wider elements, already established in the Ground-Rules paper should not be transposed, since to do so would either cast doubt on the continuing relevance of the Ground-Rules paper, in terms of the first dimension I spoke about or, might be seen as a selective "cherry-picking" in the interest of some delegations and against the interest of others.
8. Therefore as Michael Ancram has indicated, the purpose of these proposed amendments is to import into our rules of procedure a number of elements from the Ground-Rules, or Command Paper 3232, which represent useful operational additions

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to the draft before us.

9. The Ground-Rules are the document of reference which define the basic character of these negotiations. While some of them set out the wider framework within which the negotiations have been conceived and are properly a matter for the two Governments, others are of more specific procedural significance. These we have transposed unchanged from the Ground-Rules into the draft rules of procedure.
10. In paragraph 2 of the draft bearing today's date, we propose to indicate the scope of the three strands and other formats on the basis laid out in the Ground-Rules.
11. In paragraph 10, we propose to make clear, as in the Ground-Rules, that negotiations in each strand will open on the same day and proceed in parallel.
12. We also envisage including the material relating to the Business Committee which appears in the Ground-Rules.
13. A longer series of proposed amendments relates to the conduct of the proceedings. Delegations will recognise the relevant procedural elements from the Ground-Rules.
14. To remove any possible ambiguity about the basis on which the comprehensive agenda for the negotiations as a whole would be adopted, we are agreeable to the insertion of the words "by agreement" at the appropriate point in the first sentence of paragraph 15 of the draft before us.
15. We are also willing, in the same spirit of compromise and helpfulness, to adjust the language in the first sentence of paragraph 15A in the "additions" document. The word "agreement" would now be qualified by the words "a comprehensive".
16. We are also willing to extend the second sentence in paragraph 17A in that document by adding the words "or limited by anything other than the need for agreement".
17. Mr Chairman, we have sought only to facilitate agreement around this table. We accept that these preliminary discussions are important. We all want the negotiations to be on the best possible basis, to achieve our common goal of a comprehensive agreement.
18. At the same time, we should be aware that the eyes of the public are on us. The public have difficulties in understanding long procedural wrangles. They want to see the political parties at this table show that they are ready and able to negotiate a way out of our difficulties.
19. At what is a particularly fraught time in Northern Ireland it is more important than ever that the signal we send from this place is one that generates steadiness and hope. For that reason I hope we can keep our procedural debate to the minimum possible limits and begin as soon as possible the real task which all our constituencies sent us here to undertake.