

NORTHERN IRELAND TALKS

Since the talks were launched on 10 June and Senator Mitchell installed as Independent Chairman of the opening plenary in the early hours of 12 June the participants have been discussing

- rules of procedure

- the agenda for the rest of the opening plenary.

2. Protracted discussion, skilfully chaired by Senator Mitchell, brought matters to the point where the rules were agreed by "sufficient consensus" on 29 July. The participants did, however, fail to agree an outline agenda for the rest of the opening plenary, which is to resume on 9 September.

3. The Irish and SDLP feel they have been on the defensive throughout and are angry at having to concede much of the ground reflected in the papers circulated by the two Governments on 6 June setting out proposed arrangements for the talks. They are unwilling to accept that the original proposals were bound to be challenged by the Unionists (as HMG warned) seeking to demonstrate "ownership" of the process. They tend to dismiss the discussions of the past few weeks as "tedious procedural wrangling", though without themselves ceding points readily, and as evidence of Unionist determination to prevaricate. From time to time they express concerns about HMG's good faith and commitment. Behind all that they are uneasily conscious that Sinn Fein will be looking at the rules and the lack of substantive progress in the talks; and are concerned that developments so far will give the Republican Movement no incentive to declare a ceasefire and seek admission to the talks.

4. The SDLP is feeling particularly badly battered. The impression that the Unionists have seized control of the talks process, combined with the huge negative effect of Drumcree on nationalist perceptions of the prospects for a peaceful accommodation, has further undermined the SDLP's relative standing vis a vis Sinn Fein in the nationalist community. Apart from its own interests, the Irish Government is therefore keen to restore SDLP credibility and confidence.

5. Mr Bruton has in fact, in his public comments, been more ready than some of his colleagues to acknowledge the importance of developing a negotiating framework with which all concerned are comfortable and the advantages of generating shared ownership of the rules of procedure.

6. The key issues have been

- the identity and role of the Independent Chairman: Unionist concerns about Senator Mitchell have been largely disarmed by his courtesy, impartiality and effectiveness; the original definition of his role (about which Senator Mitchell himself had reservations) has been watered down while leaving him with plenty of scope to exercise his considerable facilitating skills
- the two Governments' co-sponsorship of the talks and their joint objectives, as reflected in the Ground Rules (Command 3232): without conceding the point of principle the two Governments have gone along with wording in the rules which does not force Unionists to acknowledge or support the Governments' co-sponsorship of the talks, or their objectives

- the need for an open agenda, but one which could not be misrepresented as requiring Unionists to "negotiate on the Union": the agenda will be cast in general terms and Unionists have agreed to negotiate on broad headings such as "constitutional issues", but any participant can raise any issue and be assured of a "fair hearing"
- decommissioning: disagreement over how to address this highly politically symbolic issue finally surfaced in discussion on the agenda for the rest of the opening plenary and prevented agreement.
- very conscious of the pressures on the SDLP and anxious that the process should not prejudice their standing in the community, or expose them unnecessarily to Sinn Féin's challenge
- the "address" to decommissioning promised in our communique of 28 February was never going to be easy and the last few days have illustrated the difficulty of even reaching agreement among the talks participants on how to go about it. The two Governments must work together over the Summer to identify constructive ways of persuading the parties to move towards our joint position
- understand the UUP are thinking about a further meeting with you. We have strongly encouraged that and I urge you to pursue the idea. The greater the level of understanding and confidence on both sides, the better our chances.