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SECRETARY OF STATE'S PRESS CONFERENCE, CASTLE BUILDINGS  
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SIR PATRICK:

First of all I'd like to thank you for being so assiduous, if not patient, in staying here over a very long period of time. Secondly I'd like to say that it is, I think, a satisfying thing that we have come through now to a positive result on the question of the procedural rules and we have established a Business Committee. The participants have all agreed the principle of confidentiality. I think that that is a sensible thing. That therefore does restrict me in what I am able to say about what has occurred.

We have just agreed now to adjourn until the 9th of September. I think that it is important to remember how many people were saying at the outset 'of course this can never work'. Here is a process of talks which have taken a very long time to put together. There has been a period of something like six weeks in which very detailed discussions have taken place and although the achievement may be described as 'modest' it is nevertheless a positive achievement. And it is particularly encouraging to people who have put such importance upon and such expectations and hopes upon the success of this process that it is by agreement now going to resume - by unanimous agreement going to resume on the 9th of September. I think there is very good reason to hope that we shall move forward to a fruitful conclusion once we have resumed.

Q: But you haven't yet set an agenda...

SIR PATRICK:

We have settled on the procedural rules which will govern the way in which the remainder of this agenda is to be determined. It has taken a long time. We have set up also a Business Committee which may have a role in that, but we have not now, as yet, gone forward to completion of our discussions on the agenda. That is right.

Q: Will the Unionists get their decommissioning committee for August or will it have to wait until September?

SIR PATRICK:

I'm not able to say more than that the parties have agreed to resume on the 9th of September and they have agreed that best efforts will be made to make use of the period in between. And I think we must all hope that on the 9th of September we will continue our discussions and carry them through to a fruitful conclusion. I think it's very encouraging that the parties have



agreed to do that.

Q: Have you not simply postponed another crisis. Mr Paisley says he will not accept decommissioning not being dealt with ahead of the political matters?

SIR PATRICK:

We have been engaged in this process now for something like four years and many are the times when I've been told 'oh you're just putting something off'. But when things have been postponed, when there has been time for reflection, when there has been some time for refreshment, then we have moved on. And I hope and believe that that will be the case.

Q: Last week the PM said he hoped all sides could move to substantive dialogue as quickly as possible to restore people's confidence. You must admit that you have ended here on a very low note with very limited progress?

SIR PATRICK:

Well, of course there could have been more progress and we would all have liked to have seen that. I endorse, we all endorse, what the Prime Minister said about hoping to get into substantive talks as quickly as possible. What I think you have to remember, all of us have to remember, is that we are dealing now with a process which is intended to overcome divisions which go back literally centuries and therefore it's not surprising that progress is slow. What is encouraging is that progress has been made.

Q: What do you say to those who observed all this before the mini re-shuffle and thought that perhaps Sir Patrick was fed up and wanted to be at home with his feet up?

SIR PATRICK:

I think people who read that speculation will now realise that like so much speculation in the Press there's no foundation for it.

Q: Ian Paisley said he thought the talks would be 'imperilled' is the SDLP and the Irish Government refused to address decommissioning. While you can't comment in detail, do you think they are in peril?

SIR PATRICK:



I don't think that these talks are in peril. I think they would have been in peril if there had been no agreement today as to resuming on a set date, proposed by the Chairman and accepted unanimously. That really would have been perilous. Now there is an intention to resume. Of course decommissioning is an important issue. Obviously everybody understands that, or many people at least understand that, and that will be one of the issues we shall come back to.

Q: Do all the nuts and bolts have to be agreed on decommissioning before going on to substantive issues or is it just one of the other issues that has to run along with Strands 1, 2 and 3?

SIR PATRICK:

I think that the Government's position has been made clear. The Government position is quite unchanged from the date of the Communique of the 28th of February. We have to look at all these matters. We have to establish a means by which the participants in these talks will agree to carry them forward to the end of this opening Plenary and I believe there are sensible grounds for being hopeful that that will happen.