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# Progress in the Northern Ireland multi-party talks

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This page deals with developments in the multi-party talks since June 1996:

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- Agreement of the agenda for the remainder of the opening plenary
- Admission of Sinn Féin to the talks
- The Loyalist groups and the talks
- Alleged breaches of the Mitchell principles

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For information on earlier events leading up to the opening of the talks, see:

- The search for a political settlement in Northern Ireland

## The opening of the talks

Shortly in advance of the talks, on 6 June, the Governments published their proposed scenario for the opening plenary, draft rules of procedure and draft agenda for the talks. (These documents are to a large degree overtaken by later developments in the talks).

- Scenario for the opening plenary etc, 6 June

The talks were opened on 10 June 1996 by the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach.

- Opening address by the Prime Minister, 10 June
- Opening address by the Taoiseach, 10 June

Following a round of intensive discussions on 10 and 11 June 1996, Senator George Mitchell assumed the Chair of the Opening Plenary Session. General John de Chastelain is to act as Chairman of Strand Two of the talks and the Business Committee, and Mr Harri Holkeri who acts as alternate Chairman, were also present. All the delegations then committed themselves to the Mitchell principles of democracy and non-violence.

- Statement by Senator Mitchell, 12 June
- Statement from the talks, 12 June
- Further statement, 12 June



## Progress in the talks

### Before the summer: agreement of the rules of procedure

Deliberations then began, focusing on the draft rules of procedure. On 29 July Rules of Procedure were agreed, and a Business Committee was established. The proceedings of the talks are generally confidential.

- The Secretary of State gave his analysis of progress in the talks before the summer, and set out his hopes for future, in an article in Belfast Telegraph of 4 September and a speech to the British-Irish Association on 7 September. Though progress in the talks had been at times extremely slow, he concluded that their having reached agreement on procedure - especially in the tense atmosphere after the events surrounding the parades at Drumcree in early July - was a real achievement.
- Reaching an accommodation through the talks: Belfast Telegraph article, 4 September
- Sir Patrick Mayhew's Speech to the British-Irish Association Conference, 7 September

### Developments since the summer

The Opening Plenary session resumed after the summer on 9 September, and continues to meet, generally between Monday and Wednesday each week.

The Secretary of State has reviewed political progress several times since the summer. In a speech to the British-Irish Interparliamentary Body on 25 September, he emphasised that the talks process was vital to the future of Northern Ireland: without efforts to secure of peaceful settlement, prospects for the future of Northern Ireland were not hopeful.

- Plenary session of the British-Irish Interparliamentary Body, 25 September

He considered the talks process again in late October and mid-November:

- Speech to the Association of European Journalists, Dublin, 25 October
- Oral questions to the Secretary of State, House of Commons, 14 October
- Speech at the Manchester Luncheon Club, 15 November 1996

British and Irish Ministers assessed progress in the talks at the meeting of the Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Conference on 20 November:

- Intergovernmental Conference, 20 November

The Irish Prime Minister, Mr Bruton, also reviewed developments in the talks process in his statement to the Irish Parliament on 10 October:

- Statement to the Dáil by the Taoiseach, Mr John Bruton TD, 10 October

### Decommissioning

The question of decommissioning of weapons has taken up much of the time of participants in the talks since the resumption after the summer. The 28 February communiqué made clear that the opening plenary session of the talks would need



to address the proposals of the International Body on decommissioning. The Government wishes to see the total decommissioning of all illegally held weapons at the earliest opportunity. It remains committed to all aspects of the report of the International Body, including their support for the compromise approach to decommissioning set out in paragraphs 34 and 35 of that report. It believes that this constitutes a realistic way forward which could actually *achieve* decommissioning.

- The Mitchell Report

In the light of informal discussions in the margins of the talks, the two Governments prepared a joint paper setting out a possible outcome to the address on decommissioning. They later published the paper:

- Suggested conclusions to the plenary address to decommissioning, 1 October

The Secretary of State set out the Government's position further at a press conference on 1 October:

- Secretary of State's press conference, 1 October 1996

and again in the House of Commons on 14 November:

- Oral questions to the Secretary of State, House of Commons, 14 October

Decommissioning was also considered at the Intergovernmental Conference on 20 November:

- Intergovernmental Conference, 20 November

The Decommissioning Bill was introduced on 29 November:

- Statement on and summary of the Decommissioning Bill, 29 November

- Northern Ireland Arms Decommissioning Bill as introduced, 29 November

## **Agreement of agenda for remainder of opening plenary**

The agenda for the remainder of the opening plenary of the talks was agreed early in the morning of 15 October. The Minister of State, Michael Ancram, welcomed this sign of progress, and considered, in response to media questions, prospects for the two remaining issues on the opening plenary agenda - the question of the decommissioning, and the agenda for the substantive negotiations.

- Comments of Michael Ancram, interviewed by the media, 15 October

## **Admission of Sinn Féin to the talks**

The Government see advantage in principle in the talks process being as inclusive as possible. Nevertheless they hold firmly to the position that, in the absence of an unequivocal restoration of the IRA ceasefire of August 1994, Sinn Féin exclude themselves from the talks. The Irish Government take the same view, and that is the position embodied in the enabling legislation.



In the event that a restoration of the ceasefire was announced, the Government would take as much time as was necessary to reach a well-founded judgment as to whether it was indeed genuinely dependable, taking into account all circumstances, including most obviously events on the ground.

The Secretary of State has several times recently made clear the Government's willingness to see Sinn Féin enter the talks, if the ceasefire were to be unequivocally restored. They would need to establish their commitment to exclusively peaceful methods, and show they abided by the democratic process: deeds as well as words would be needed:

- Oral questions to the Secretary of State, House of Commons, 14 October
- Speech at the Manchester Luncheon Club, 15 November 1996

At the meeting of the Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Conference on 20 November, British and Irish Ministers pressed for the early unequivocal restoration of the IRA ceasefire:

- Intergovernmental Conference, 20 November

### **Recent contacts with Mr Hume**

Mr John Hume has suggested to the Prime Minister over the last few months that a new IRA ceasefire, which would in his view this time become permanent, is available if the Government clarifies its position on various issues, including the nature of the Belfast talks, decommissioning and possible future confidence-building measures.

The Prime Minister has consistently made clear the Government's position that it would welcome a new ceasefire but that it was sceptical about how credible it would be. The Prime Minister has also said from the start that there could be no question of changing policy, or negotiating with Sinn Féin, to achieve a new ceasefire, which should be declared without further prevarication. However, he has added that he was prepared to re-state existing policy if that would help.

The Prime Minister accordingly gave Mr Hume in July the terms of a possible re-statement. Mr Hume subsequently suggested different forms of words which did not, however, properly reflect the Government's position. The Prime Minister sent Mr Hume a further text on 23 November. This text included Government views, in the light of continuing IRA attacks, notably on the Thiepval Barracks, Lisburn, on the terms and process of entry to apply after any restored IRA ceasefire.

For this text, and a statement issued with it on 28 November, click below:

- Documents issued on 28 November

Michael Ancram re-emphasised on 29 November the Government's wish to see an inclusive process:

- Extracts from Michael Ancram's speech to the Irish Association, 29 November



## The Loyalist groupings and the talks

The loyalist ceasefire of October 1994 has held, and the Progressive Unionist Party and Ulster Democratic Party, which have links with the loyalist paramilitaries, remain in the talks. Ministers have acknowledged the restraint and discipline shown by the Combined Loyalist Military Command in maintaining their ceasefire, in spite of the provocation of IRA activity.

- Secretary of State's speech at Wallace High School, Lisburn, 14 October

At a meeting with the Loyalist parties on 20 November (his second with them), the Prime Minister again emphasised the importance of the Loyalist ceasefire. He told the parties that the restraint of the loyalist paramilitaries, in the face of IRA violence, had earned them credit in Northern Ireland, Great Britain and beyond. He commended too the constructive role the PUP and UDP were playing in the talks, stressing the Government's wish for early progress in them, and its determination to do all possible to bring it about.






## Alleged breaches of the Mitchell principles

On two occasions participants in the talks have drawn the attention of the Governments to alleged dishonouring by other participants of the six principles of democracy and non-violence, to which all participants committed themselves. Under the rules of procedure, it is for the Governments to take appropriate action on such representations, in the light of the views of participants. The Governments' conclusions on these representations have been made public:

- Representations against the PUP and UDP, 11 September
- Representations against the UUP, DUP, PUP and UDP, 23 September

## Other talks participants' web sites

- Irish Government (Department of Foreign Affairs)
- Irish Government (Department of the Taoiseach)
- Ulster Unionist Party
- Social Democratic and Labour Party
- Democratic Unionist Party
- Alliance Party
- Labour
- Northern Ireland Women's Coalition
- Progressive Unionist Party
- Ulster Democratic Party
- *(The United Kingdom Unionist Party does not currently maintain a web site)*

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