

23 July 1996

SDLP PROPOSALS TO THE CHAIRMAN, BOTH GOVERNMENTS AND ALL THE PARTICIPATING PARTIES

Two themes were widely agreed in yesterday's five-hour discussion on recent events.

The first was that the virus of sectarian conflict has been reactivated in our society to a degree few thought possible.

The second was that the best, and perhaps the only defence against this disaster is an urgent mustering of political will by all those around the table to move now to meaningful, substantive negotiations.

After some forty days discussion we have not yet completed even our first procedural task of agreeing rules of procedure to meet the wishes of those delegations who refused to operate the rules of procedure tabled by the two Governments on June 6th.

According to the schedule agreed on July 4th we have some 4 negotiating days remaining to us, including today.

It would be unconscionable, at this time of great political need, to send the signal that the political leaders mandated to negotiate the way out of our conflict had adjourned only to resume a further bout of sterile procedural wrangling in September.

The SDLP believe that all our constituencies would wish the negotiations to settle all outstanding procedural issues before the recess. The very minimum reassurance needed in the present crisis of political confidence is that the negotiations can go straight into substantive issues immediately they resume.

For that reason we would ask the Governments and all delegations to make the necessary effort to ensure that all the key procedural issues in the opening plenary are settled in the period before the summer recess.

We therefore propose:

1. Agreement, no later than tomorrow, on the rules of procedure.
2. A Plenary meeting of the negotiations, convened as soon as possible by the Chairman, which would
 - adopt the rules of procedure, the agenda for the remainder of the opening plenary and appoint a Business committee.

- hear opening statements by the participants including their views of the International Body's proposals on decommissioning. These statements should be time-limited by agreement, to take account of the obvious time constraints.
 - establish the three strands of the negotiations and a sub-committee to take forward the decommissioning issue.
 - adopt the draft agenda for the substantive all-party negotiations tabled on 6 June.
3. The agenda should be addressed urgently, if necessary in sub-committee format. This comprehensive agenda should be organised on the principle that every delegation should have reassurance that their respective concerns will be included and meaningfully addressed. The task of the Chairman should therefore be simply to group any additional proposals or headings put forward, to ensure they are couched in neutral and non-prejudicial terms and to allocate them appropriately and efficiently under the appropriate formats of the negotiations.

We believe this approach would allow sufficient scope for all delegations to make the necessary procedural points, while reserving substantive comment for the substantive headings where they properly belong.

Crucially, it would leave our negotiating process poised for substantive and meaningful engagement at the beginning of September.

We believe with the necessary goodwill this goal can be achieved in the days remaining. We are for our part ready to work additional days, including this Thursday and Friday, if that is necessary.

The result we seek is one which would give a signal of hope to our communities which they seek now from their political leaders as never before.

We appeal to both Governments and to all delegations to cooperate with us in achieving it.

Ends

For further information contact Seamus Mallon [REDACTED]