

DRAFT SUMMARY RECORD OF OPENING PLENARY SESSION -  
Wednesday 18 DECEMBER 1996 (11.12)

Those present:

Independent Chairmen	Government Teams	Parties
Senator Mitchell	British Government	Alliance Party
Mr Holkeri	Irish Government	Labour
General de Chastelain		Northern Ireland Women's Coalition
		Progressive Unionist Party
		Social Democratic and Labour Party
		Ulster Democratic Party
		Ulster Democratic Unionist Party
		United Kingdom Unionist Party
		Ulster Unionist Party

1. The Chairman convened the meeting at 12.12. He stated that over the past few weeks and last few days, a series of discussions had been held with the participants regarding the status of the negotiations and the schedule for reconvening the process, post Christmas. The Chairman said he wished to make a brief statement which involved a proposal for the time table in January. Following this he stated that he would invite each party to comment on his proposal and anything else which it wished to raise.

2. The Chairman said that the process was currently considering item 2 on the agenda for the remainder of the Opening Plenary. He said that everyone understood that a conclusion needed to be reached on the decommissioning issue before the remaining items on the agenda could be dealt with, which in turn would hopefully lead to a commencement of substantive negotiations and on to a comprehensive and widely acceptable agreement. The Chairman stated that there had been a lot of discussion on the International Body's proposals on decommissioning and on other proposals from

participants. But no agreement had yet been reached. The Independent Chairmen had kept in close touch with developments over the last few weeks and had had the opportunity to consult all participants during that period. The Chairman said that both he and his colleagues wished to help facilitate the search for agreement and remained ready with, the participants support, to make the effort authorised by rule 30(a) i.e. to put forward a solution which could secure agreement.

3. The Chairman, continuing, said that, in putting forward any suggested solution, one had to build on any common ground which had emerged in contacts between the participants themselves. The Chairman said that both he and his colleagues had been encouraged by the progress made in the trilateral discussions which had taken place between UUP, SDLP and Alliance. So far as it could be judged the elements of agreement reached thus far were unlikely to be contentious for other participants. The Chairman said that that agreement was, however, not yet complete, although the differences were capable, in his view, of being resolved.

4. The Chairman said there was some aspects of agenda item 2 which had not been covered in the trilateral discussions and which would need to be brought in to any proposal put forward under rule 30(a). He continued, saying that if the participants still believed it would be helpful for the Chairmen to act under rule 30(a), then they were prepared to do so. A solution had, however, not yet been identified which would secure agreement. The Chairman said he hoped it was still possible to achieve this; but further reflection on what had happened during the last three weeks, and in particular the past two days, as well as discussing ideas with his colleagues and with the participants was required first. In view of this, the Chairman proposed that the process resume on



13 January with the facilities being available for use by the participants for meetings among themselves and with the Chairmen. The Chairman said he also wished to propose that the plenary reconvene at noon on 27 January, by which time meetings held in the preceding two weeks would hopefully help point the way to a resolution of the decommissioning issue.

5. The Chairman said that between now and 13 January, both he and his colleagues had agreed to consult among themselves. Participants should also be encouraged to do this if that was felt to be helpful in widening the area of common ground. The Chairman asked that if such meetings occurred, any developments should be conveyed to him and his colleagues. The Chairman then asked the participants, in turn, to comment on his proposals. He also indicated that he would be issuing a brief public statement later in the day. A copy of the statement is enclosed as Appendix A.

6. The British Government stated that it recognised that detailed consultations had taken place over the last few weeks and it agreed with the Chairman's analysis. The British Government added that it had hoped to see agreement being reached by this stage, but obviously this had not been possible so far. It was therefore content to support the proposal outlined by the Chairman. The Irish Government said it too accepted the Chairman's analysis. It was unfortunate that progress had not been made thus far and it therefore seemed sensible to go along with the Chairman's proposals for the scheduling of business in the new year.

7. Alliance stated that one had to try to give some hope to the community at this time of year. Despite the fact that this was not possible at present, it believed the process remained the only source of reconciling differences and making progress towards

peace. Alliance stated that it was unfortunate that six months had past with little to show for it. There would be those who might say that this time had been squandered. Such a view was regrettable but the party believed that the Chairman's proposals gave an opportunity for everyone to reflect on what had occurred to date and to come back in the new year with a greater determination to succeed. By way of demonstrating its commitment to the process in the new year, Alliance stated that it had already set about arranging meetings with other parties on 13 January. The party said that it sincerely hoped that a greater concentration of minds could be achieved in the new year.

8. Labour said it concurred with the Chairman's proposals. It continued, saying that it was regrettable that the major participants in the process hadn't yet succeeded in reaching agreement on decommissioning. Labour said it very much hoped that the new year would provide the opportunity for the major parties to come to agreed conclusions on the issue. The NIWC said it also supported the Chairman's proposals. It said it was disappointed that the process hadn't got further. Mention had been made in September about "starting a new term" but the reality was that the term had passed everyone by, due to the antics of some around the table who had behaved like schoolchildren at times. The party continued, saying that it was full of despair about the process at the present time. From its contacts in the community the party stated that the public was clearly expecting a lot from all the representatives and it seemed reasonable for people to assume that a significant point on the agenda would have reached by now as opposed to being at the current position. The party said it hoped that those participants who had been placing obstacles to progress along the way would hopefully think about this policy over the



Christmas break. In closing the NIWC offered the compliments of the season to all.

9. The PUP said it accepted the Chairman's proposals. It too was disappointed at the pace of progress, but was heartened to some degree by those participants who had recently been working together. It hoped that something positive would come from this in the new year. The SDLP said it endorsed the Chairman's proposals. It said that it was a pity that the process had not been able to provide a better political Christmas present for the whole community. The party said it took some hope from some of the recent discussions with other parties and it believed that the seeds of further progress were embedded in the commitment to continue with these discussions. The SDLP stated that it was also a pity that the community had not yet received the other major political Christmas present of a complete and permanent cease-fire from the IRA. The party said it hoped that this wasn't too far away. Continuing, the SDLP said it would be available from 13 January for further meetings in preparation for the plenary on 27 January. In the interim the party offered everyone the compliments of the season and hoped that all would return renewed with greater strength to try to address the issues more effectively in the new year.

10. The UDP stated that it had only been involved on the periphery of recent discussions. However, despite this, it had identified areas which needed further exploration. The party said the objective for the process must be to find not just the minimum level of agreement but to achieve as full a consensus as possible. The UDP stated that it intended to have meetings on 13 January and it supported the proposal to give a period of two weeks for further bilateral/ trilateral discussions in advance of the first plenary.

11. The DUP said there was evidence that some parties at the table were not prepared to face up to the reality of the situation. The IRA was not some sort of Santa Claus and the people of Northern Ireland could not depend on them to contribute to a peaceful Christmas. Punishment beatings continued and the police were issuing warnings to people. Indeed some people had had to move home. Insofar as the issue of decommissioning was concerned, the DUP said it was not prepared to compromise on principles. It said it was time for the meeting to either adhere to the Mitchell Principles or forget about them. The DUP said it resented the schoolchildren analogy advanced by the Women's Coalition and also resented being lectured by both the Women's Coalition and Labour parties on the need to listen to and respect the views of the community. The DUP did, in fact, represent the views of a large section of the Northern Ireland Community. The DUP also said it took exception to some of the SDLP's earlier remarks about the stance of certain unionist parties (it and the UKUP) towards the trilateral discussions yet those parties had not been involved in the various discussions going on between the other representatives.

12. The DUP added that it resented proposals being misrepresented as proposals from the two governments when the proposals in question were in fact originated by others. The party said it was time to end this charade.

13. In relation to the status of the present talks the DUP said that the portrayal of the talks by some parties as "the only show in town" was unrealistic. There were several other shows such as the discussions between the governments and other bodies. The talks process had been marginalised by these other discussions and



there had not been any real dialogue in the past few weeks at the talks.

14. In relation to the Chairman's proposal for reflection over Christmas and the enthusiasm expressed for this by the Alliance Party, the DUP proposed that, immediately after the fortnight's break, the Chairman convene a meeting of all of the participants so that the outcome of these reflections could be shared by all. The DUP said that reflections would probably continue until Easter and it had no power to prevent this occurring. In concluding its remarks, the DUP wished all present a Happy Christmas.

15. The UKUP wished the Chairmen the compliments of the season and expressed thanks to their staff and to all other staff involved in providing services to the parties in the building. The party then endorsed the DUP's remarks and said that, although a small party, the UKUP had the support of the electorate, its leader having been elected to a constituency. The UKUP, as with the DUP, was tired of references by certain parties who had no equivalent mandate, but yet professed to speak for the community at large.

16. The UKUP added that it appeared from remarks made by the SDLP that there was an impression that, but for the DUP and UKUP, the UUP would quickly reach a compromise with the SDLP. The UKUP said it believed that the thoughts of many members of the UUP were in fact in line with those of the DUP and UKUP on the decommissioning issue. The UKUP said it was surprised to learn from the Chairman that the paper arising out of the recent discussions between the Alliance Party, SDLP, and UUP could not be circulated to other participants. The UKUP said that the Chairman was behaving properly on this matter because he needed the approval of the parties concerned to do otherwise. However the UKUP said that the

subject matter of those discussions had been publicly discussed on RTE between members of the SDLP and UUP. Quotations from the document had been used as well as statements made to the effect that all but one of the paragraphs had been agreed. But, said the UKUP, access to the material was being denied to the talks body. It was to be hoped that, in the new year, there would be greater openness than what had just been highlighted. Furthermore the party said that consensus could not be effectively defined solely in terms of agreement between the SDLP and UUP; it was important to note the requirement for "political efficacy".

17. The UKUP then said it resented the "patronising lectures" from the Labour and Women's Coalition parties. Those parties always appeared to be ready to assent to everything proposed by the two governments and the UKUP found this unacceptable. The UKUP said it would continue to oppose anything, including what might emerge from the present Alliance Party, SDLP and UUP discussions, which was not in the interests of the pro-union people.

18. The UUP supported the timetable suggested by the Chairman. The party said this allowed time for reflection and for further negotiations to be held in relation to item 2 of the agenda. The party also referred to the "obstacles to progress" mentioned earlier by the NIWC and said that the lack of a cease-fire by the provisional IRA was the main obstacle to peace. The UUP added that it was committed to the multi-party talks for those parties which were committed to peaceful methods. The party also said it had seen an RTE television programme the previous evening and had been discouraged by the attitude adopted by the SDLP and also by the fact that confidential matters relating to the recent trilateral talks had been revealed during the course of the programme.



Material concerning particular areas of disagreement had also been disclosed on the programme.

19. The SDLP interjected to say that it had not quoted from the document - the material in question had, in fact, been referred to by the UUP delegate on the programme. The UUP then said it had forgotten who precisely had referred to the matter because it was so upset at the breach of confidentiality which had occurred! The party said it was not good for people to reveal such matters publicly on TV, nor was it acceptable for representatives of the main parties to behave in such a bitter way. The UUP then offered the compliments of the season to the Chairman, his colleagues, all staff and participants and said that it hoped the people of Northern Ireland would have a peaceful 1997. The British Government responded in similar terms. The DUP said it wanted its proposal about an informal meeting on 13 January 1997 put to the meeting. The Chairman said that if he put his proposal to the meeting and it was accepted that would mean the DUP proposal had been rejected. The DUP suggested that its proposal, be taken first as an amendment. It confirmed it was not seeking a plenary meeting, but an informal one, so that the Chairman could assess the parties' reflections on the issues being faced over the Christmas break, before proceeding into bilaterals etc.

20. The Chairman said he would proceed on the basis that the plenary would be adjourned until noon on 27 January, 1997. In the meantime the parties should make themselves available for meetings in the period 13 to 15 January, and 20 to 22 January. The Chairman said that he would consider the DUP suggestion to have an informal meeting of participants on 13 January. The Chairman concluded by saying that he hoped that 1997 would bring the lasting peace and

reconciliation to Northern Ireland which was desired by all. The meeting then adjourned at 12.55.

Independent Chairmen Notetakers  
14 January 1997

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