DRAFT SUMMARY RECORD OF OPENING PLENARY SESSION - TUESDAY 24 JUNE 1997 (14.08)

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 (Senator Mitchell) convened the meeting at 14.08, and sought approval of the draft record of the previous two sessions of the Plenary, held on 3 and 10 June respectively. On hearing no objections, the Chairman recorded approval of the draft record of both sessions.

2. Moving on, the Chairman said the participants were aware that the two Governments were working to reach agreement on a joint proposal for proceeding with the issue of decommissioning. He had been advised by the two Governments that they had decided to distribute their document to participants the following day, in the afternoon. The Chairman noted that the British Prime Minister was expected to make a statement on Northern Ireland in the House of Commons the following day. He also noted that the House of Commons would take up the subject of appropriations for Northern Ireland on 26 June, and would debate the annual renewal of direct rule on 30 June. These events would occupy the British Government and a number of the participants. Accordingly, the Chairman proposed

that, following distribution by the two Governments of their joint paper on decommissioning, the two Governments would be available to brief participants on their proposals between 25 June and the following Tuesday, 1 July. The Plenary would resume on 1 July, at 12.00, with a full discussion on the two Governments' proposals, at which time each party would have the opportunity to state its view, ask questions of the two Governments and other participants, and hold a general discussion for such time as the participants thought useful. The Chairman then invited comments on this proposal.

3. The UKUP referred to comments it had made on 3 June, when it said that a series of parallel talks was taking place at which the terms and conditions necessary for a future IRA cease-fire were being negotiated. The party said these negotiations inevitably impacted on the issue of decommissioning. It said that the multi-party negotiations had become something of a macabre joke as the real discussions and business were taking place between parties and groupings outside the talks. The party said that the Secretary of State had described this analysis as Machiavellian. It noted that the Secretary of State had said that these talks were exploratory, and contrasted this with media reports that the Prime Minister planned to confirm publicly that negotiations had taken place in which the British Government had given assurances that decommissioning would not be a block to Sinn Féin's entry to talks. It noted that this would be occurring after the IRA had killed two RUC constables in Lurgan. It said the British Government would agree to Sinn Féin entering negotiations after a six week cessation of IRA violence. The UKUP said this was a re-run of the talks held between Sir Patrick Mayhew and the IRA in October 1993, the only difference being that their existence was known, even if their content remained secret.

4. The UKUP said another series of parallel talks was taking place today - between the British Prime Minister and the UUP. It said if delegates needed an illustration of the importance attached to the multi-party negotiations, they should consider the fact that the UUP was not represented by either its leader, deputy leader or security spokesman, and that the SDLP leader was absent, as was the Secretary of State. The party said the negotiations were a side show.

5. On a point of order, the NIWC asked whether the UKUP was addressing the question in hand, and how long it would take in the course of its answer. The UKUP stated that it was addressing the question, and said it would speak for as long as was necessary to do so. The Chairman said it was the policy of the Chair to allow delegates maximum leeway with their comments. He said that, although this practice had been criticised, since it allowed lengthy speeches which did not always address the subject in hand, to enforce a stricter rule would inevitably create more problems. He said it would not be practical to ensure all speeches fully addressed the point at all times, and trusted that delegates would address themselves to his proposals in some of their comments.

6. The UKUP said its contributions were always relevant to the question in hand. On this occasion, it was speaking directly to a most fundamental issue concerning the function of the negotiations, namely its relevance and how it related to parallel talks. The Party noted that the negotiations will have been adjourned three times since their resumption on 3 June and that, on each occasion the Plenary had sat for only one of the three days available. It said this was because discussions were taking place elsewhere between the two Governments, and between the British Government and the two parties it believed could deliver consensus. The party

assumed the British Government would have a consensus on decommissioning if it was able to secure the agreement of David Trimble, John Hume, and one of the two parties representing loyalist organisations. The UKUP said it believed this was the purpose of the Prime Minister's meetings with Mr Trimble and Mr Hume, and warned that the British Government was making a mistake if it thought it could secure sufficient consensus in this way.

7. The UKUP referred to press reports that the Prime Minister was also scheduled to meet the DUP leader. It was critical of Downing Street for claiming that this meeting had not been arranged because it did not have a contact number for Dr Paisley. The UKUP said that Downing Street had been unable or unwilling to confirm to the party who was meeting the Prime Minister. It asked if this what was meant by open government and confidence building, stating that this was destructive of confidence. The UKUP said the parties must decide whether they were gathered together to negotiate, or merely to rubber stamp the results of negotiations held elsewhere. It also said it would be surprised if the Independent Chairmen had agreed to chair a series of negotiations whose subject matter was not to be determined by the participants.

8. The UKUP asked why was the Plenary being asked to adjourn. It said this was because parties represented in another place were dictating the manner and mode in which decommissioning would be handled. It referred to comments by participants who had attended the South African seminar that the parties there had owned and controlled the negotiations. It said decisions had been made by the then South African Government and the ANC, without any reference to the wishes of other countries. In contrast, the UKUP said the current negotiations were owned by the British and Irish

Governments, who controlled and manipulated them. It said the end result desired by the two Governments would be achieved by negotiations held outside the multi-party negotiations. It said that the current talks were neither open, frank nor honest, and ultimately would be unsuccessful.

9. The SDLP said it was broadly in agreement with the Chairman's proposal. It said it looked forward to receiving the two Governments' paper and to considering it in a detailed way. There was little point in commenting further until it had the paper in front of it. The party said there were two broad points that it wished to make.

10. The SDLP said that participants had been engaged in a lengthy series of discussions on every aspect of the decommissioning issue in Plenary, bilateral and trilateral format. It said that every possible angle had been explored, and doubted that there was anything further to add. The SDLP said that it hoped, when the two Governments' paper had been tabled and properly considered by the participants, the Chair would be able to reach a speedy decision on how to proceed on the basis of the two Governments' proposals. The party said that the only touch-stone for dealing with the logistical aspects of decommissioning was the Report of the International Body, and the suggestions contained therein. It said parallel decommissioning would be impossible to resolve unless it were agreed on the basis of the Mitchell Report. The SDLP said it would welcome the two Governments' paper if this proved to be the case. It asked the participants to reach a conclusion on this issue speedily, believing a further protracted discussion of the Governments' proposals would be disadvantageous to the set objectives of the negotiations. The SDLP said it hoped the Chair would ensure a tight timescale in which the issue of

decommissioning would be resolved, and participants could proceed to substantive negotiations on the 3 strands. It said it would await the two Governments' paper with interest.

11. The UKUP asked whether the SDLP had already seen the two Governments' paper, stating that the SDLP leader had said on television he had had some insight into its content.

12. The SDLP said it had not seen the paper. It said the party had had a meeting with the British Government to discuss the matter. It said that participants would be discussing a concrete set of proposals that the two Governments were going to make. This was the main point, and discussions between the British Prime Minister and party leaders was secondary to that. It said it had not seen any details, nor any piece of paper. The party said it must wait to study and assess the paper when it received it. It said that, from its understanding of its contents, the paper represented the way forward on decommissioning. It said that some of the participants to the multi-party negotiations were prepared to follow leadership if the two Governments took the lead on this issue, observing that the ultimate responsibility for decommissioning rested with the two Governments.

13. The SDLP called upon delegates to stop diminishing the negotiations by referring to them as a side show. It expressed its surprise that unionist parties should look with disfavour on meetings between their party leaders and the British Prime Minister. The party said it looked forward to receiving the joint paper and believed that, on this basis, progress could be achieved towards substantive negotiations. It said the multi-party negotiations had the capacity to deal with the political problems facing Northern Ireland if participants had the resolve to do so.

14. The DUP said that participants were entitled to comment on any matter brought before them by the Chair, and said delegates should listen to those with whom they disagreed. It said that the public was tired of those who complained at the lack of progress yet those people were content to adjourn the Plenary. It said the public was asking why the Plenary had been adjourned at the time of the IRA killings in Lurgan. The DUP said that the present delays were because of political circumstances in the Republic, where one Government was in limbo and the other in purgatory, and said that the people of Northern Ireland did not wish to be dictated to by the politics of the Republic. The party said it, and its supporters, resented the fact that Mr Bruton could make an announcement about a decision affecting Northern Ireland, and repudiated his right to do so.

15. The DUP said it believed the SDLP had already seen the two Governments' paper, referring to the SDLP's statement that it represented the basis on which to resolve decommissioning. The party said the Secretary of State had told the DUP in a meeting yesterday that the paper had been gone through piece by piece with David Trimble. If this had been done for the UUP, the party believed it would also have been done for the SDLP. It said the Secretary of State had also welcomed Mr Bruton's statement, and expressed its belief that the content of the decommissioning paper would be leaked to the Republic's newspapers. The DUP asked why the SDLP spoke of parallel decommissioning if it had not seen the Governments' paper, and said it believed the SDLP had seen a paper at some stage. It said that the Governments' proposals were in effect a joint document for non-decommissioning.

16. The DUP said some participants had put forward their own proposals on decommissioning. It said the SDLP had ensured that delegates did not have a chance to vote on these proposals when they were tabled previously. The DUP asked whether there would also be an opportunity to discuss and vote on its decommissioning proposals or whether only the proposals of the two Governments would be discussed.

17. The Chairman said that no voting procedure had been included or excluded in consideration of the proceedings. When the Rules of Procedure were agreed it had been possible to table and vote on amendments. Without wishing to rule on a hypothetical situation, the Chairman said that an opportunity to table amendments would arise when decommissioning was being debated.

18. The DUP said the Chairman had not answered its question. It said the DUP proposals should be disposed of by the Plenary, and not be treated as amendments to the two Governments' proposals.

19. The UKUP asked whether it was first necessary to reach a consensus on whether or not to proceed to a vote before participants could vote on any proposal as the Chairman had previously ruled. It said this had occurred when the DUP tabled its own decommissioning proposals. It said the SDLP, at the instigation of the two Governments, had then voted against moving to a vote, thereby preventing a vote being taken on the grounds that there was insufficient consensus. The party asked if this would again be the case. The DUP said this was a good question.

20. The Chairman said his prior ruling spoke for itself and there was no issue of voting before them. He said there would be the maximum opportunity for participants to speak and vote on the

decommissioning proposals. He noted that the DUP and UKUP had been emphatic, when discussing the Rules of Procedure, that the Chair would not have wide-ranging powers and so he would not make a ruling. The Chairman said he hoped they would be able to discuss and vote on a proposal if there were to be one.

21. The DUP said it was unclear as to the Chair's ruling, and would test it. The party said it did not want to be limited to making amendments to a document that had been agreed between the two Governments. It asked what was the role of President Clinton, noting the meeting with Prime Minister Blair in Denver. The DUP said it resented the fact that American investment was held to be contingent upon political agreement. It said the assurance given by the two Prime Ministers that decommissioning would be addressed first had been a con trick to get parties into multi-party negotiations. Since then the two Governments had made a u-turn on this. It said the UUP leader had also changed his position, contrasting earlier comments by Mr Trimble that he would withdraw from the negotiations if decommissioning was not resolved to his satisfaction, with his present stance on the issue.

22. The DUP said it had not asked for a meeting with the Prime Minister. It wondered why the Downing Street press office had tried to deny that Mr Trimble and Mr Hume had been invited to meetings. The DUP said its position on decommissioning was crystal clear, and said the two Governments' document contained nothing that would attract the DUP's support. It said the actions of Downing Street were unhelpful, and called on the British Government to make amends. It said there was no option but to adjourn the Plenary as there was no paper to discuss.

23. The SDLP asked the DUP if it wished to table its own proposals on decommissioning. The DUP replied that it would be happy to do so.

24. The Alliance party said it awaited with interest the two Governments' paper, and hoped it would mirror proposals contained in the Mitchell Report, and material from other sources on decommissioning. If so, Alliance would be happy to work with it. The party said the conduct of the two Governments with regard to the release of their paper was regrettable. It noted that the press appeared to have been informed of the content of the paper before the parties. It believed the document had already been agreed between the two Governments, or they would not have announced that it would be distributed tomorrow. If this were so, it asked why the governments would not make their paper available now. It noted that Mr Trimble had already given a response to the proposals, and said it was unfair that other parties were denied the opportunity to do so as well. Alliance said there was a sense that the negotiations were being manipulated. It said this was disrespectful to the participants and damaging to the process. It said it was futile to wait until tomorrow to distribute the paper as the press would have detail of the document's content in the meantime.

25. The DUP said it had earlier contacted the Chairman, who had told them that he understood the document would be tabled today. When they arrived for the start of the Plenary they were told that this would not be the case.

26. The Chairman said the DUP's account of what he had said was inaccurate. He said he had been informed at 13.10 that the DUP wished to meet with him as soon as was possible. At 13.30 they had

met, at which point he had told the DUP he had just come from a meeting with the two Governments. He told the DUP that the two Governments were contemplating presenting the paper at the Plenary session subject to a final decision being made at a further meeting to be held at 13.45. These were his exact words. At 13.45 he was informed by the two Governments that they had decided not to proceed today, but to present their paper tomorrow. Shortly after this meeting he informed the DUP of this development.

27. The DUP confirmed that these were the words used by the Chairman. It said, however, that he had omitted to say that he had received a copy of the joint paper on decommissioning but had not, at that point studied it. The party observed that the document was available to the Chairmen but not to the parties.

28. The Chairman replied that he had said he had received a copy of the two Governments' paper, but had not had an opportunity to study it. He said that the Chairmen had returned the paper to the two Governments at their 13.45 meeting. He said he still had not read the paper, saying that this point was not relevant to the discussion in hand.

29. Alliance said this was further evidence that the paper had been agreed and was available if the two Governments chose to distribute it to the parties. It said there was clear evidence that agreement had been reached on the paper yesterday, and that the process was being manipulated. The party said the delay in releasing the paper was to allow the Prime Minister to announce details of its content in the statement he was expected to make in the House of Commons tomorrow. It said it would appear that details of all sorts of discussions were more readily available to the chair of a community group than the leader of a political

party. Alliance said the negotiations process was in danger of falling apart if the participants were not accorded greater respect. It described as unprecedented the extent of the problems in which the British Government has found itself over the last month. Alliance said it would look at the Governments' paper in comparison with the Mitchell Report, its own proposals and those of others. If there was material relevant to decommissioning it should be brought before the Plenary.

30. The UUP said the SDLP's request for a limited time-scale for discussion of the decommissioning proposals was tantamount to a guillotine which, it believed, would not set the right tone for agreement to be reached. The party said there was a degree of substance to comments on procedure. It said that many procedural problems could have been resolved if the Business Committee had been able to meet to discuss them. Regarding the Chairman's proposal on the timing of the next meeting of the Plenary, the UUP asked whether it would be helpful for participants to consider appointing a Business Committee.

31. The UKUP referred to another paper which it said the British Prime Minister intended to table. The party said the British Government intended to release details of the terms and conditions for entry to negotiations offered to Sinn Féin/IRA on 13 June. It said that it was obscene that within a week of an IRA murder, the British Government should make public the conditions demanded by Sinn Féin/IRA. The party said the Prime Minister was complying with the demands of Sinn Féin/IRA. The UKUP said this acceleration of the process by violence, as had happened when the British Government announced the date of multi-party negotiations following the Canary Wharf bomb, was unacceptable to the people of Northern Ireland. Sinn Féin/IRA will not murder its way into the talks.

32. The DUP asked why the British Government had not responded to the charges put to it by participants. It asked why the British Government was not tabling the joint document in Castle Buildings today. It accepted that there were matters which it was appropriate for the Prime Minister to table in the House of Commons. However, it said decommissioning was not one of them, being a matter for the multi-party negotiations. The party said the joint paper was already in Castle Buildings, and believed details of its content would appear in the press. In these circumstances it could not understand the Governments' logic for not distributing the joint paper to the parties. The DUP stressed that, as far as it was concerned, proposals by the two Governments were of no greater significance than those of any other participant, and should not be treated in any way differently. The party said there was nothing in the Rules of Procedure to allow the Governments' proposals to be decided upon without the other proposals being dealt with first. It said that other parties' proposals had not been decided on because of the requirement for consensus on voting before proceeding to a vote. It said this was an absurd ruling, and asked whether participants would be required to vote on the two Governments' proposals by a consensus achieved outside the multi-party negotiations, whilst avoiding a vote on the other parties' proposals.

33. The DUP said it supported the UUP proposal to convene the Business Committee, saying it believed many procedural problems could have been avoided had the Committee been sitting. It said there was no reason why the Committee should not immediately be set up, adding that many participants wanted to know the time-scale for meetings of the Plenary over the coming weeks. It noted that the

Business Committee of the Forum had performed this function to the satisfaction of that body's participants.

34. The Chairman, referring to the previous questions addressed to the British Government, explained that it was normal practice in Plenary sessions for participants who had questions directed to them to either choose to respond immediately or not at all. The Chairman then asked the British Government how it wished to proceed.

35. The British Government said it would answer the DUP's questions. Firstly it stated that the decommissioning proposals were the product of work between two sovereign Governments, though in strictly procedural terms, the proposals carried no more weight than those presented by other parties. However any decision about releasing those proposals was a matter for the Governments and them alone. The British Government said that it believed that release of the document the following day still provided the opportunity for the participants to use a period of one week for consultation and to discuss and review its contents and then return on Tuesday next to hold a full Plenary discussion on it. The British Government, for its part, believed the document would provide a basis from which substantive negotiations could begin. However it emphasised that it was for the participants as a whole to decide what to do with the proposals in Plenary discussion. The British Government added that it was hopeful that the document could be dealt with effectively in the timetable and manner outlined by the Chairman in his earlier proposals.

36. The PUP stated that there had been some departure from normal practice during this Plenary session. The party said that, in the past, the Chairman having tabled proposals, would usually move on

and hold a tour de table seeking comments on them. This had not happened, for whatever reason, and some delegations had already had two speakers contributing to the discussion. The PUP said this approach tended to open up a whole can of worms, with some participants failing to address the original proposals at the expense of point scoring. The PUP said it took no consolation from the fact that other participants were being treated like mushrooms, as it itself was, in the handling of the release of the governments' decommissioning proposals. However it was in agreement with the Chairman's original proposals.

37. The UKUP said it wished to provide an answer to the DUP's earlier question regarding why the document was not being released to participants until the following day. The party said that the Prime Minister had earlier met with the UUP leader and would later meet the SDLP leader at 17.00. The party said that there was absolutely no guarantee that the contents of the present document would be the same when it was released the next day since these meetings might give rise to alterations or amendments to it. The party said it was also likely to be the case that the document would not be placed in the public domain until and unless assurances were given by others as to their acceptance of it. This move to gain consensus on the document was why talks delegates were not going to receive a copy of the document now.

38. The DUP intervened, referring to the UUP's earlier proposal about the Business Committee, and said it now wished to see the Business Committee convened forthwith. The UUP said it had not made a formal proposal to convene the Business Committee. It stated that it had simply been outlining the structural defects of the current situation which all participants now faced with regard to the delayed release of the decommissioning document. There was

a need for the process to take greater control of the scheduling and planning of its future business and considering the use of the Business Committee to do this seemed a worthwhile exercise to undertake sooner rather than later. The UUP said it was quite content to resolve the issue of the Business Committee either at this Plenary or have it considered over the next few days. The UKUP said it wished to second the DUP's comments regarding the Business Committee and asked that the Plenary resolve the issue as quickly as possible.

39. The Chairman stated that in terms of business, the process was still dealing with item 2(a) of the Opening Plenary Agenda. The Chairman added that he recalled that prior to the present discussions, the DUP and UKUP said that the process couldn't go beyond item 2(a) until this was resolved. The Chairman asked both parties what the position was in relation to the handling of the Business Committee proposal and how this sat with their previously stated positions. The DUP said that the Chairman was attempting to be mischievous in his comments since the issue of the Business Committee was not related to substantive agenda issues but rather a procedural matter. The Chairman stated that he had only sought to make a genuine enquiry on the point and was not in any way wishing to be mischievous. The DUP reiterated that the Business Committee proposal was a procedural matter and therefore nothing to do with stated positions regarding the agenda. The PUP said it was somewhat unsure about the Business Committee proposal being adopted at this stage of the proceedings. The party suggested that it might be better if delegates met informally to handle issues of business scheduling etc as had been the case many times in the early stages of the talks process. The PUP said people could come along to the meetings and the difference in numbers between the informal format and the present configuration was not significant.

If this suggestion was worth implementing the party questioned whether there was a need for the Business Committee to be established at this time.

40. The UKUP read out rules 13-15. The party said these rules were important since they conferred an integral role in the proceedings for the Business Committee. The party added that a Business Committee had been established in the Forum and it believed that the other parties who attended such a place saw benefit in establishing a similar vehicle for the talks process. The party said that if the PUP felt that some other method should be used to plan and schedule the business of the process, then it (the PUP) should table an amendment to the rules. The PUP returned to its earlier remarks, emphasising that it had not said that a Business Committee was not needed. What the party was saying was, why not simply meet on an informal basis at this stage. It was only a suggestion, not a proposal.

41. The SDLP said some clarification of the situation was needed. It said that surely the participants needed to resolve the proposals outlined by the Chairman at the start of the meeting first before moving on to consider the merits or otherwise of convening the Business Committee. The SDLP re-affirmed its view that it saw the Business Committee focusing on and supporting the co-ordination of committee activity whenever the 3 strands of the negotiations commenced. It said it was quite clear that a Business Committee was needed when this point was reached. Alliance said it had no difficulties dealing with the Business Committee proposal either now or later. The difficulties were really about decommissioning not about not having a Business Committee. Alliance, referring to earlier remarks from the DUP, said it wished to record its view that the Business Committee did not "govern" the

affairs of the process but rather provide an element of facilitation, though it acknowledged that the term had probably been used inadvertently. Alliance continued saying that the events of the meeting and in other places had greatly emphasised the need for a Business Committee to meet. Such a Business Committee, in its view, should determine when issues came forward to the Plenary. At present the Chairman was being placed in an invidious position with matters being landed on him without any pre-planning or preparation in aspects of handling or progressing. The party said it didn't go along with the PUP's suggestion of informal meetings. The Business Committee comprised two delegates from each party. This was clearly established in the agreed rules and should be followed.

42. Alliance said that given its past experience of talks processes, there was little doubt that previous Business Committees had been extremely helpful when it came to handling the serious business of the process. The party said that if this process wished to move into the area of conducting substantive business - and since the process re-commenced on 3 June such matters had been manifestly badly mishandled - then it was up to the Business Committee to sort these out. Alliance said that if a formal proposal was being made now, it would support it now or later in the meeting. At this point Alliance held up a copy of the Belfast Telegraph front page which had reported contents of the decommissioning document and said that this clearly pointed to the absurdity of the whole situation. The reality of earlier comments by the DUP was now evident for all to see and everyone knew at what time the Belfast Telegraph was put to bed each day. This clearly showed that the newspaper already had details of the document from early morning or the previous evening and one could only speculate as to how a copy had been got to the paper. Given this position,

Alliance said it supported the Business Committee proposal whichever way it was to be handled.

43. The UKUP said it completely endorsed Alliance's remarks on the issue of the Business Committee. The party said that for far too long the ordering of the affairs of the talks process had been in the hands of the two Governments and the Chairmen. The party said the process was presently not owned by the parties at all. Business was being conducted, not by the parties, but by a schedule dictated by both Governments. The party said it was not surprising that there were worries about the role of the Business Committee. The proper role of the Business Committee would be to take charge of the schedule of planning etc and this would be looked at unfavourably by the SDLP which had earlier talked in terms of both sovereign governments "driving the process forward". The UKUP said if that was the principle underpinning the process, then there would be no need for a Business Committee. The party said it had no difficulty in agreeing with the DUP proposal. The proposal also had at least the tacit approval of several others around the room. In referring to the Chairman's earlier comments on discussion of a Business Committee in relation to not moving beyond item 2(a), the UKUP affirmed its view that such a proposal was not a substantive issue but a procedural one. Such a view was underpinned by the contents of rule 13 and in particular the last sentence which set out the basis under which the Chairman could permit a determination of the proposal for the Business Committee to convene. There was therefore, in the UKUP's view, no difficulty in handling the proposal and determining the outcome under this approach.

44. The UUP reiterated its view that the Business Committee would give a focus to ongoing work. The Committee could also look at aspects of timetabling since regular discussion of the procedural

aspects of business in a Plenary format with some 70 delegates present was quite unwieldy. The party said it didn't know why anyone had a hang-up about the proposal. Implementing it would mean that all parties would be engaged on a permanent basis in handling and convening business. The idea was being put forward as a practical issue. It had no political baggage attached to it. The party said it couldn't therefore understand why it was so contentious. As to how it was handled, the UUP said that the Business Committee proposal should be taken first since it did not displace anything on the current agenda for the Opening Plenary Session.

45. The DUP said that now that the decommissioning document had appeared in the press in some detail, it wondered whether the two Governments should not release it to the participants now rather than have them go through the indignity of reading it in the newspapers. Referring to earlier comments made by the PUP in relation to the holding of informal meetings, the DUP said that the Business Committee was a vehicle which got rid of party entourages and hence large numbers, thereby making the Committee more informal and able to progress issues more speedily. At the end of the day however, the DUP said that the reluctance to move towards a Business Committee meeting was more to do with recognising the SDLP's power of veto on the issue. This had been clearly demonstrated on a previous occasion when the SDLP sided with both Governments to defeat a proposal aimed at convening the Business Committee at that time.

46. The NIWC said that it wished to offer support for the Chairman's original proposals. The party said it was right for the Chairman and the process to attempt to try and reach a consensus on the decommissioning issue. The party said it was somewhat

surprised by Alliance's earlier comments in relation to reaching consensus, since surely this was what was needed. The party had also been surprised by Alliance's analogy between the Chair of a Community Group and the leader of a political party. The NIWC said it had always understood that the Business Committee would be activated as and when substantive negotiations commenced. The party said it had no problem with the Business Committee, but if it was not possible to set up now, the party expressed agreement with the DUP's earlier comments regarding the need for proper timetabling and scheduling.

47. With the arrival in the room of the Secretary of State, the UKUP welcomed her presence and continued by saying that it believed the proposal for the Business Committee to convene was a good one. The party said that, in listening to the comments around the room on this issue, it had sensed a change of mood to one of unease, which spanned many groups, about how the whole process was being handled organisationally. The party said there appeared to be a two tier arrangement operating. Tier one appeared to include the two Governments and the SDLP and from time to time one other party. This group could be referred to as the "ins". The remainder of the participants and second tier were the "outs". The UKUP said this scenario had irked the party for a while though it had not, it appeared, irked others until today. The party said it wished to suggest to the two Governments that matters could go a lot better in the process if everyone was treated collectively with a great deal more respect. The party said the Alliance had made some comments which necessitated careful study on the part of the two Governments since the process itself could not be seen to be railroaded along a particular route or seen to be put down in the face of pre-determined decisions. These included the position of Sinn Féin being present at the talks process without any pretence

to decommission IRA weapons, a cease-fire being called, and after six weeks, negotiations taking place on the strength of that cease-fire. The UKUP said it looked very much as if this was the route the process was already going down and if this was the case, it hoped the two Governments would think again about this approach. The party asked what made the two Governments think that a cease-fire would be any more permanent now than it had been previously? The UKUP said the way matters were heading in the process could only lead to a dissolution of the body with two or three groupings representing a large section of one part of the population leaving their seats. The UKUP asked the two Governments to think about their actions again in these terms.

48. Labour said the progress of the talks process and the meeting today was entirely predictable. The party said many around the table had already referred to talks going on in other places. The party said it hoped that these other talks might bring more hope and progress than what was occurring within the room. The party said its hopes for progress were dented every time it attended talks meetings in Castle Buildings. Recalling the visit to South Africa, the party said that the fundamental issue in resolving that conflict was that everyone involved in the process wanted a solution. The party was not so sure that this was the case in the multi-party talks. It said one only had to listen to the speakers from certain parts of the room to recognise this. Labour said that above all else, surely the murders of the RUC officers in Lurgan must give a spur to everyone to try to gain consensus and to move the process forward. Regarding the proposal for the Business Committee to convene, Labour said it had no problem with this but didn't see the urgency for it unless the process got into substantive negotiations. The party said it was reluctant to comment on the decommissioning paper from the two Governments since

it hadn't seen a copy. Even if the paper had been made available prior to the Plenary commencing, Labour said the responses from some participants would not have been any different to those now made in its absence.

49. The British Government said it had listened carefully to all comments on the proposal to convene the Business Committee. It believed it was appropriate, given these, that the Plenary consider the issue very shortly. The PUP said it wished to propose that the meeting adopt the Chairman's original proposals. The Chairman asked for any further comment. The SDLP enquired about the distribution of the decommissioning document the following day. What time would this occur? The Chairman said it was his understanding, subject to any clarification from the Governments, that the paper would be distributed the following afternoon. The British Government intervened to offer the facility of faxing the document to parties the following day if this was more convenient. Alliance raised the question of whether the Chairman and his office should have responsibility for distributing the decommissioning document as had occurred with previous papers for discussion within the talks.

50. The UKUP intervened to propose that the copies of the document given to the Chairmen around 13.30, but handed back at 13.45 to the Governments, be returned to each of them now. The Chairman stated there was no necessity for this since he had, in any event, been unable to read the contents of the paper at that time. The UKUP said that the process was back to a situation of maintaining honesty and truthfulness. The documents given out earlier to the Chairmen should be returned to them now. The Chairman said that that was a matter for the Governments to decide on. The UKUP then asked the two Governments to do this. The Chairman again explained

the procedure of participants wishing or not wishing to respond to direct questions before asking the British Government to comment. The British Government said that the decommissioning document was the joint property of both it and the Irish Government and as such they had the right to determine when to distribute it etc. The British Government stated, however, that in the light of the UKUP's request it was quite happy to hand the copies back to the Chairmen. The NIWC intervened to say that it thought other parties should recognise and respect the rights of those who sought to produce proposals and papers and to allow them to determine how these should be handled. The UKUP said it was very unhappy with the situation. There could quite easily be two different versions of the paper between what was given to the Chairmen around 13.30 and what the Prime Minister would deliver the following day in the House. The DUP asked about the timing surrounding the document's release. The British Government said it would be available at 15.30 on Wednesday.

51. The SDLP said that, in relation to the UKUP proposal, parties were surely free to do what they liked with the distribution of their own papers. The party said that if the UKUP's proposal that the British Government should return the documents to the Chairmen was implemented, this would not place the Chairmen in a very satisfactory position - since they would then become embroiled in judging the differences between versions, if this occurred. The party said it believed the UKUP proposal set a very dangerous precedent and while it understood the British Government's helpfulness in its comments, it was better to avoid this scenario since it would be counterproductive and unhelpful to the Chair. The SDLP said it was not the business of the rest of the parties to know what was being arranged between the Chairmen and those parties who were producing papers for future discussions. The Chairman

intervened at this point to clarify the fact that both he and his two colleagues handed their copies back to the Governments. The Governments had not asked for the copies to be returned.

52. Alliance recalled previous comments being made to the effect that the two Governments were simply two of the ten sets of representatives present at the talks. The party said this was not the case. The two Governments were sovereign governments. Unlike the other representatives, the two Governments had not been elected to the body so there was no point in pretending that the weight of government documents was the same as those produced by other participants. Alliance said that one had to remember that the reason why the two Governments saw fit to produce a joint paper on decommissioning was because the body couldn't agree on a way forward on the issue. The party said it also had to be emphasised to both Governments that they had to remember that they were not the same as the rest of the participants when it came to the handling and organisational aspects of the release of documents. Alliance, again referring to the Belfast Telegraph, said that the practical political reality of the present situation was that the press had the document. When participants left the building, they would be asked for comment on the document. But it had not been distributed and wouldn't be until 15.30 tomorrow. So participants would then be faced with hearing or reading the contents from the press people and then being asked to offer comment. Alliance said this state of affairs only produced a shambles and created little respect for the process. Furthermore, said Alliance, it knew that Sinn Féin would have the document, given the experience of the previous talks process when that organisation even received papers which the other parties at the talks didn't get. Alliance said this whole issue was one of the reasons why a Business Committee

needed to be convened - on the basis that it might restore some respect and semblance of order to the proceedings.

53. The DUP said it didn't need lectures from the SDLP on how to react to the decommissioning document when that party's leader had already been taken through the document and it was quite evident that the party (the SDLP) had the document. The DUP said it recalled the comments of the SDLP's deputy leader earlier in the meeting about what the document could do for the process etc, but now he had left the meeting and couldn't answer any further questions. The DUP said that this whole issue was an insult which had been planned in advance. Not only had the Governments, the SDLP and UUP seen the document but Sinn Féin had also seen it. The DUP said this was a even greater insult than Alliance and the other parties being told to wait until the next day for their copy.

54. The UKUP asked why was there a need for the partial embargo on the document? Everyone was aware of who had partial sight of the paper so why continue to hold it back from the remaining participants. The party said it agreed with the DUP's view that Sinn Féin had already been consulted about the document by the British Government. The party said the real reason for the partial embargo was a timetabling one. It was to allow the Prime Minister to put a spin on the contents of the document in order to sell it to the Northern Ireland public before local elected representatives could comment on it. In referring to the earlier comments of the British Government on the Business Committee proposal, the party said it was interesting to note its (the British Government's) presumption that the process would reach substantive negotiations. This confirmed for the UKUP that the British Government was confident that the decommissioning document would be pushed

through. The UKUP said this was a further sign of the process being told what to do and not being in control of its own affairs.

55. The DUP said that given the present situation, there was little course open to the Plenary other than to have another meeting next Tuesday. The party again questioned whether, during the debate on the paper other proposals previously submitted or any other new ones could also be discussed? The party said it understood the purpose of the decommissioning paper. It knew what the two conditions were which had to be met to get Sinn Féin into the talks. The first demand was a six week timetable following an announcement of a cease-fire. The second was that decommissioning would not be allowed to be an obstacle to substantive negotiations. The party said this was what would be announced by the Prime Minister in the House tomorrow and these proposals were the product of recent contacts between NIO officials and Sinn Féin which had considerably developed previous government thinking on the issue.

56. The Chairman asked whether there were any objections to the Plenary now adjourning until noon on 1 July. The Chairman reminded everyone that, in the interim, the opportunity was there for parties to consult with the Governments and review and discuss the contents of the decommissioning paper. The DUP sought clarification as to what the Chairman meant by "adjourning now". The Chairman provided clarification. The DUP reminded the Chairman that there was another matter to be dealt with. The Chairman acknowledged this but again sought comment on his proposal for a noon Plenary on 1 July.

57. The UUP said it didn't believe noon was a good time on which to start a full discussion and said it would be better to fix a time to permit on uninterrupted debate. The UKUP proposed that the

Plenary commence at 11.00 am. This was agreed. The Chairman then turned to the issue of the Business Committee and reminded participants that following nominations received during the summer break of 1996 the Committee had met once on 28 October. The Chairman then asked whether the activation of the Business Committee again should now be the subject of a vote. Alliance recalled the comments concerning up and coming parade commitments and suggested that an early meeting of the Business committee should deal, on a practical basis, with the timetabling and programming of future meetings. The Chairman then asked for a vote on the activation of the Business Committee. For the proposal were Alliance, Labour, NIWC, PUP, UDP, DUP, UKUP and UUP. Against the proposal were SDLP and the Irish Government. The British Government abstained. With this the Chairman declared that there was insufficient consensus and the proposal was therefore lost. (Some of the DUP delegation left the meeting at this point.)

58. The SDLP said it wished to recommend that the same procedures, as previously applied, continued, whereby the Chairmen's office effectively organised diaries and the timetabling of meetings. The UKUP, on departing from the room, said it wished to refute this recommendation because it was the two Governments and not the Chairmen who were controlling and manipulating the process. The party said it was an absolute disgrace that the talks process could not have a Business Committee. It was a ridiculous position and demonstrated the second rate organisation surrounding the process when one viewed the fact that the British Government had abstained and the Irish Government had said no - yet all other parties, except the SDLP, had voted in favour of the proposal. The party said that this scenario once again underlined the strength of the relationship and dependence between the Irish Government and the

SDLP which was sadly not mirrored between the unionist parties and the British Government.

58. With no further comments, the Chairman adjourned the meeting at 16.28 until 11.00 am on Tuesday 1 July.

Independent Chairmen Notetakers
30 June 1997

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