21 July 1997

STATEMENT TO PLENARY BY PAUL MURPHY MP

The attached is a copy of the full statement to this afternoon's Plenary Session of the Multi-Party Talks by the Political Development Minister, Paul Murphy MP.

DEBATE ON PROPOSALS AND AMENDMENTS CONCERNING DECOMMISSIONING, 21 JULY

Statement to plenary by Minister of State, Paul Murphy MP

1. This debate comes after several months of discussion and debate on the issue of decommissioning which have given all participants the opportunity to become very familiar with each others positions.

2. I do of course very much regret the absence of the three Unionist parties from today's plenary discussion. It deprives us all of an opportunity to hear them set out the thinking behind the proposals and amendments tabled last week. Leading members of the UUP delegation are of course meeting the Prime Minister in London today, but I hope they will be here to resume their constructive participation in these talks tomorrow.

3. The Government's own position is fully set out in the joint paper circulated by the two Governments on 25 June, to which were attached the "possible conclusions" which the two Governments have tabled for consideration in this debate and which they believe provide a basis for reaching a generally acceptable resolution of the issue of decommissioning, when we come to reach a determination on Wednesday. The two Governments provided further clarification of their position during last Wednesday's plenary discussion. I do not therefore propose to say any more about those "possible conclusions" at this stage.

4. We have of course looked carefully at the alternative proposals tabled by the three Unionist parties, and at the various amendments to the two Governments' "possible conclusions" which have been tabled by the DUP and by the UUP. There will be opportunities to make

specific comments on individual proposals and amendments at a later stage, but I should like to make a few general points now to give an indication of the Government's general approach to those proposals and amendments.

5. First, the Government shares the general desire that the restoration of the IRA ceasefire should mark a total and irrevocable end to politically motivated violence in Northern Ireland, and that it should lead as early as possible to the total and verifiable decommissioning of all illegal weapons - Republican and Loyalist - and other terrorist materiel. However, we are absolutely confident that the approach reflected in the two Governments' "possible conclusions" is more likely to achieve that result than the approach reflected in any of the alternative proposals.

6. That judgement is of course consistent with the Governments' judgement that the report of the International Body offers the only realistic way of resolving the issue of decommissioning. We are committed to the implementation of all aspects of the report of the International Body, including the "compromise approach" to decommissioning set out in paragraphs 34 and 35 of that report. The Government will therefore be unable to support any proposal or amendment which is inconsistent with the report of the International Body.

7. My third general point is that I fully understand the fears and concerns of those in the Unionist delegations who have emphasised the need for decommissioning. In any open democracy like ours it is of course intolerable that any organisation should resort to terrorism or, having decided to desist that it should hang on to its illegal weapons. As I acknowledged last Wednesday, the concern that the threat of renewed violence could be used to influence the course or

outcome of the negotiations is a real and valid one. However, I believe it can be - and indeed has been - answered. Any development in these talks requires the agreement of parties representing majorities in each part of the community; and any agreed outcome will need to be endorsed by referendum in Northern Ireland, and in the Republic. The Government, the people of Northern Ireland and all the political parties in Northern Ireland, have stood firm against actual terrorism for nearly 30 years. I find it inconceivable that they would be swayed by the threat of violence if any such threat were to be attempted during these talks, quite apart from the fact that any such threat would be inconsistent with the Mitchell principles. Given their firm public positions and the political imperatives operating on them, I cannot see either Government, or any other participant, agreeing to anything they regarded as unfair or unwise under the threat of force, whether explicit or implicit.

8. In short, I am confident that these talks will lead - <u>can</u> only lead - to a democratic and widely acceptable outcome.

9. Finally, I am happy to reiterate that the two Governments want to see the earliest possible decommissioning of all illegal weapons and will be working to achieve due progress, alongside progress in the substantive political negotiations, towards the total and verifiable decommissioning of all such weapons. Decommissioning in the sense we have been talking about necessarily requires the cooperation of the paramilitary organisations concerned. But the two Governments have made clear that (if their proposals are agreed on Wednesday) the mechanisms to enable further progress to be made on decommissioning alongside negotiations in three strands will be in place by 15 September. The two Governments will, as I say, be working to achieve due progress on <u>all</u> aspects of the negotiations from that point onwards.