

DRAFT SUMMARY RECORD OF OPENING PLENARY SESSION -
MONDAY 28 OCTOBER 1996 (12.10)

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 called the meeting to order at 12.10 and suggested that perhaps more time would be needed by the delegations to consider the minutes of the meetings circulated on 25 October, 1996 covering the sessions on 14 October (2); 16 October (2); 21 October (3) and 22 October (3). It was agreed that the meeting the following day would deal with approval of these minutes as the first item on the agenda. As to the day's business, the Chairman said that he proposed to ask those delegations who had not yet made presentations on decommissioning when they proposed to do so. Following that the delegations could make suggestions as to how they wished to process when those presentations were completed.

2. The DUP said that the Business Committee had just completed its discussion on the item before it and that the Chairman's report in the matter could be given to the meeting. The party also referred to its long opening submission on the subject of

decommissioning and intimated that it had not completed its full presentation on the matter. The Irish Government said that its position would be outlined by the Minister for Justice the following day.

3. The UKUP said that in the Chairman's absence oral submissions were made by both the UKUP and the DUP. The party felt that it would have been helpful to have had a structure or formula in place so that particular questions could be asked of those delegations who had made presentations. A mere presentation was not satisfactory, it said, as points of substance or comments might need to be made to tease out essential issues. The UUP said it would not be in a position to present its submission before Wednesday (30 October, 1996).

4. Alliance said that up to that point in the process, a number of preliminary comments had been made about the Mitchell Report. Their position was that they accepted the Report and, having submitted a paper to the meeting, they had nothing further to contribute at the present stage of the debate. The party accepted that others may have a different view in not accepting the Report (except for the Principles). When the meeting moved on to discuss the substantive question of decommissioning and how it was to be dealt with, Alliance would submit material on that matter, possibly by Wednesday, 30 October, 1996. The Chairman said he had read the delegations submissions on decommissioning as outlined in the minutes and, was fully aware of the overall position. He suggested that the UUP presentation could be made on the Wednesday, followed by Alliance. The UUP said it could not actually confirm that it would be in a position to proceed on that day. Alliance said it would outline its paper on Wednesday. The PUP said that it would not be making a statement in the immediate

future. It then transpired that the NIWC, SDLP and the UDP could present their papers to the meeting there and then.

5. The Chairman said that that order would be followed with the Irish Government presenting its statement on the following day and Alliance on Wednesday. The British Government said it would be making a statement. It had circulated a paper on the issue earlier and thought it would be better if it listened to what all the delegations had to say first. It would also be putting a further paper to the meeting. Labour said it would be submitting a paper the following day and, at the Chairman's suggestion, agreed to make its presentation following that of the Irish Government.

6. The UKUP reiterated that both it and the DUP had made lengthy oral submissions and the DUP had also presented papers on the subject. The UKUP hoped to be in a position before the following Monday to file a written presentation of its views, notwithstanding the fact that these have already been summarised in the minutes. The UKUP returned to the matter of raising questions on presentations and said that it would be prepared to take questions on its earlier oral presentation at the present stage in advance of the filing of its full submission. The Chairman confirmed at that point that the meeting on the following day would commence at 10.00am with the presentation by the Irish Government followed by Labour.

7. The DUP said that it too would take questions as to the position it had outlined. It was keen to have a discussion on the matters raised not just statements on the introduction of papers. The party suggested that such questions could begin in the session commencing the following week. The Chairman said that was a

sensible suggestion. Accordingly, he proposed to devote the three days in the present week to complete the series of opening remarks by the delegations and that the following week would be given over to questions by the delegations to explore the areas of agreement and disagreement.

8. The Irish Government said that there could be no possible objection to the idea that delegations could raise questions with the one caveat that it would not wish to add a new rubric on the agreed agenda to cross-examine delegations or force them into making statements, responses or pronouncements which they might otherwise not wish to make. The Irish Government said that the decommissioning issue had to be explored, but delegates would appreciate that the complexity and enormous scope of the subject could delay matters for weeks if not months. That was why the two Governments had suggested dealing with the matter in a special committee, so as to avoid holding up important progress on the other items of business. The Chairman said that he thought the reference in agenda item 2(a) to discussion was wide enough to embrace questions and comments on the subject.

9. The DUP said that it seemed that any proposal that emanated from the unionist side was treated by the SDLP and Dublin as suspicious. It stressed that it had no ulterior motive in the matter, and that it was motivated by a desire not merely to talk at each other on the subject, but to have an interaction by means of questions and answers. The UUP referred to important Parliamentary business in the House of Commons on the following Tuesday and Wednesday which might require the attendance of some participants and thus affect the business of the meetings. As regards procedure after the completion of the opening statements, it said that it was in favour of a more focused discussion on the

key issues and the need to structure the debate in a more positive way. While the meeting had not yet had a report from the Business Committee on the morning's proceedings, that Committee could provide a structure for these subsequent discussions.

10. The DUP said, with reference to the point made by the Irish Government, about putting the matter of decommissioning into a sub-committee, that course of action would not be acceptable to it. It was necessary to move on to the stage of taking decisions and determining the issues in the Plenary session. The UKUP said it was keen to deal with decommissioning in such a manner that everybody knew precisely what was going to happen in relation to it. The party had lobbied for a Freedom of Information Act and its approach to the matter was that it was prepared to answer every question asked of it in relation to the party's position on the decommissioning issue. The UKUP had no hidden agenda and it hoped that not only would a full discussion take place, but that decisions would be taken on the principle of how decommissioning was to be implemented. Decommissioning had to be determined, not just addressed, the party said. As to the question of structuring of the discussions, the three unionist parties had tried hard to bring some form to the discussions and they wanted to get the Business Committee involved for that purpose. Also, an order to provide a solid foundation for the discussions and to arrive at a comprehensive position, there was a need for delegations to appoint spokespersons to answer questions on their party's opening statements.

11. The Chairman outlined the programme of presentations as already set out for the remainder of the session in the week. He said that the British Government had reserved its position until all statements had been made. It should, therefore, be possible

to complete the opening remarks on the subject by Wednesday 30 October, 1996. Every party should then submit in writing to his office by Friday, 1 November, 1996, their up-to-date position or re-submissions of previous statements with any necessary amendments. The objective was to get into discussions on Monday of the following week. He then asked the Chairman of the Business Committee (General de Chastelain) to present his report of the meeting of the Committee earlier that morning.

12. The Chairman of the Business Committee said that the meeting had discussed the motion to disband the Committee made by the DUP in the Plenary session the previous week. Under the provisions of Rule 2 of the Rules of Procedure the matter, as it involved an amendment of the Rules, had first to be discussed in the Business Committee followed by the agreement of the Plenary group. After a full discussion had taken place the DUP had withdrawn its motion and the meeting of the Business Committee was adjourned. The formal withdrawal of the DUP motion had to be made in Plenary session.

13. The DUP said that it was pleased that all delegations had attended the meeting of the Business Committee (except for Alliance who had boycotted it). It said that there seemed to be a unanimous view that the Committee had a task to perform and the question of the appropriate point at which the Committee should meet was discussed. Everyone seemed to think that the time for that was not far off. On that basis, and having proved the point that the Committee could meet without the sky falling in, the party had decided to withdraw its motion on disbandment of the Committee. It then withdrew the motion formally.

14. Alliance said it did not boycott the meeting of the Business Committee. It had reserved its right to attend such meetings when real business was to be transacted in the Committee, and it did not believe that that was the case in this occasion. The UUP said it had raised the matter of the absence of Alliance with the Chairman who told them that he had been informed by the party that it would not be attending the meeting. It wondered whether that was not a boycott? The Chairman said that the meeting would proceed to hear the opening presentations by the NIWC, the SDLP and the UDP. The three parties then read their prepared material. At the end of that process, the Chairman said his office would circulate copies of texts of oral presentations if participants chose to avail themselves of that service.

15. The British Government asked if it could be possible to have the text of the UKUP presentation which was made in the previous week. The UKUP said that a summary of its material was already available in the transcript of the proceedings for the relevant dates. This was not a full record of the UKUP presentation but the Government would have to put up with the quality of the service it was providing in this regard. The Chairman adjourned the meeting at 14.00.

Independent Chairmen Notetakers
29 October 1996

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