

DRAFT SUMMARY RECORD OF BUSINESS COMMITTEE SESSION -
MONDAY 28 OCTOBER 1996 (10.30)

Those present:

Independent Chairmen	Government Teams	Parties
General de Chastelain Mr Holkeri	British Government Irish Government	Labour 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 session at 10.40 and stated that this, the first meeting of the Business Committee, was the result of a motion made at Plenary to abolish the Business Committee. Under Rule 2 of the Rules of Procedure, discussion of such a proposal affecting the Rules was necessary at the Business Committee. Before proceeding with the matter he invited participants' views on the venue chosen for the meeting. The DUP inquired if the committee room on level 5 was not a bigger room. The Chairman said that it had been considered along with two other rooms but the present venue was selected because of its better layout and size.

2. The Chairman explained that the present session was concerned solely with one matter - the proposal to abolish the Business Committee - and was required to report its views to Plenary. He drew participants' attention to the role of the Business Committee as set out in the Rules of Procedure. He emphasised that it was

not a policy committee but rather a tool of the participants to assist in the ordering of business in the policy sessions. He proposed to invite the views of each party in turn and reminded participants of the need to complete deliberations, if possible, before the Plenary Session scheduled for 12.00.

3. The British Government proposed that the parties advocating disbandment should speak first. This was agreed and the DUP outlined the reasoning behind the proposal for disbandment of the Committee. The Committee was simply redundant if delegates, for some obscure reasons, were not prepared to allow it to function in its proper role. As an example, it was pointed out that the Plenary would be meeting at 12.00 with no idea of the ordering of its business. It was surely desirable that the Business Committee be given a role in the ordering of business, including that relating to the decommissioning issue. If other delegates were to recognise the proper logistical role of the Business Committee then the DUP said it would be happy to withdraw its proposal for disbandment of the Committee.

4. The UUP assured the other parties that it had no ulterior motive or hidden agenda in seeking the convening of the Business Committee. The UUP position on the Business Committee was that it should be convened to guide, and enhance the quality of the Plenary sessions. It was evident from the discussions at Plenary that some parties did not appreciate the potential benefits of the Business Committee. They were urged to reconsider their refusal to use the Committee.

5. The UKUP said it was evident no-one wanted to see the Business Committee abolished. The UKUP supported the views of the DUP and UUP on the need for a dynamic role for the Business

Committee and expressed bemusement at the objections to a Business Committee meeting in relation to the decommissioning issue. The attitude of the British Government in particular was difficult to understand in that decommissioning was likely to be more effectively debated by involving the Business Committee. At present the subject was a great amorphous idea floating about, being addressed in a random and disorganised manner. It was to be hoped that delegates would decide that the Business Committee should continue to exist, that parties would agree to use it in the role intended, and that the parties would agree to hold a proper meeting of the Committee soon.

6. The SDLP said that, whilst the rules didn't specifically stipulate that the Business Committee should be restricted to the three strands, there was an understanding that its role would principally relate to the strands. The SDLP could see how the Business Committee could help to structure the Plenary, but the party was concerned that it might, in relation to the decommissioning issue, become another means of stalling progress. The SDLP would like to hear the current initial round of presentations before the Business Committee next meets.

7. The UUP asked the Chairman for some explanation for the absence of the Alliance Party. The Chairman said he had just received a note to say that the party would not be attending the meeting.

8. The Irish Government welcomed the Chairman in his inaugural role as Chairman of the Business Committee and went on to state that the Irish Government was opposed to the disbandment of the Committee. It was important to avoid untoward symbolism being acquired in relation to the Committee. The Business Committee, as

its name implied, had a self-evident role. Whether convening the Committee in the context of decommissioning would be helpful was doubtful in that several of the participants feared that this would merely extend tactical manoeuvring and games over decommissioning into yet another forum. If there were no games in Plenary, there would be no problems in the Business Committee. Games in Plenary meant games in the Business Committee. The usefulness of the Business Committee would be realised once a degree of confidence was achieved in the Plenary sessions. Only then could the Business Committee get on with its work crisply.

9. The DUP accused the Irish Government of contradiction. Firstly, it was the view of the DUP that its participation covering decommissioning in the Plenary sessions was fully serious. Secondly, there was a likelihood that there would be more opportunity for tactical games in the Plenary Committee if the Business Committee were not properly exploited. Thirdly, the purpose of the Business Committee was surely to help build confidence. The DUP stated that there was a further important need for the Committee and this related to the management of participants' time. Participants had busy schedules and some were anxious to have advance notice of events at the discussions in order to prepare personal timetables. It was suggested that the Business Committee should at least meet to work out timetables.

10. The UKUP criticised the SDLP suggestion that any resistance to an SDLP proposition on the part of a unionist party was simply "tricks". The UKUP assured participants that it wanted to get on with the proceedings and expressed resentment at the continued accusations of insincerity directed at some of the unionist parties. Although speeches by UKUP had at times been lengthy, there had been no repetition and no filibustering. The UKUP was

seeking from the Business Committee a means of giving form to the discussions and providing a schedule for business. In respect of the Irish Government's view, the UKUP considered that decommissioning was indeed business and was therefore within the ambit of the Business Committee. The Business Committee ought to be used to give shape and direction to all proceedings of the discussions.

11. The British Government said that no compelling case for abolition of the Business Committee had been advanced, the difference in view being when it was appropriate to begin its operation. The British Government was not in principle opposed to an early meeting of the Committee. The British Government noted that it appeared that the SDLP would accept a meeting of the Business Committee once Item Two had been addressed.

12. The UUP supported the DUP's criticism of the Irish Government's position and reaffirmed that there was no ulterior motive in seeking involvement of the Business Committee. This should be put to the test. The party suggested that some participants had probably taken positions on the matter at Plenary on emotional rather than rational grounds. It urged a review of the decision taken last week. The UKUP said that the British Government had allowed the SDLP to exercise a power of veto in the matter of this decision.

13. The NIWC said that its opposition to the convening of the Business Committee at this stage had been based on logic. There was a danger of over-structuring. The party had committed itself to a dynamic process and was concerned about the drawing out of proceedings. The NIWC noted the need to respect fully the SDLP's position on this issue as it was the only nationalist party in the

discussions. If the SDLP and UUP agreed to calling a meeting of the Business Committee once Item Two was dealt with, the NIWC would agree.

14. The Labour Party expressed delight that there was no serious attempt being made to abolish the Business Committee. In supporting the non-convening of the Committee last week the party simply had not considered that there was any appropriate business for the Committee to conduct.

15. The UUP drew attention to what it perceived as inefficiency in the way the proceedings in the Plenary were presently taking place; for example one and a half days had been lost last week. An Agenda was insufficient for Plenary sessions. There had to be some prior consideration given to moving from one agenda point to the next and this was for the Business Committee to address. The UUP also asked for cognisance to be taken of the fact that three of the unionist parties wished the Business Committee to be activated.

16. The SDLP expressed willingness to listen to other parties. In relation to the issue of the Business Committee when it arose last week, the SDLP had had a very legitimate political concern. It was anxious to avoid the decommissioning issue becoming a straitjacket for the discussion of other topics.

17. At this stage the Chairman reminded participants that it was 11.45 and that there was no support expressed in favour of abolition of the Business Committee. Clearly the Committee could recommend to Plenary that the Business Committee should not be abolished. The DUP asked the Chairman if Rule 14 was deemed to apply to the Business Committee in relation to the powers allocated to the Chairman.

18. The Chairman responded that he believed Rule 14 did apply to the Business Committee in relation to the powers of the Chairman, but he considered that the circumstances at the moment constituted a unique case which did not fall easily under that rule. While the Business Committee had been established by the Plenary Committee on 29 July, the same Plenary Committee had ruled that it did not wish the Committee to be activated at this stage (other than for the procedural requirement of Rule 28 for it to discuss the motion to disband it). The Chairman said he felt that once the Plenary Committee had lifted the restriction on activation, all rules affecting the Business Committee would come into force.

19. The DUP offered to withdraw its proposal to abolish the Business Committee when the Plenary session resumed at 12.00. It was agreed to terminate the present session on that basis and the Chairman thanked all the parties for their contribution.

Independent Chairmen Notetakers
29 October 1996

BCMI01/96