

SUMMARY RECORD OF A MEETING OF THE STRUCTURES SUB-COMMITTEE
AT PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS ON THE MORNING OF 12 MAY

Government Team

Mr Hanley
Mr Fell
Mr Bell
Mr Hill

Alliance

Mr Morrow
Mr Close
Mr McBride

UDUP

Mr Robinson
Mr Vitty
Mr Wilson

Talks Secretariat

Mr Hallett

SDLP

Mr Haughey
Mr Farren
Mr Durkan

UUP

Mr Empey
Mr Cunningham
Mrs Bradford

Others present

Mr Smyth

The meeting began at 12.00 and ended at 12.45 pm.

2. The Government Team proposed continuing the discussion of the Alliance Party paper. They said that a consensus appeared to be emerging that there was a degree of inherent instability in the sort of Executive envisaged by the Alliance.

3. The SDLP delegation clarified their position: although the Alliance proposal for appointing an Executive had inherent weaknesses, the SDLP agreed with them on the need for an Executive in which both sides of the community were represented.

4. The UUP delegation said that while they were willing to take the Alliance document as a basis for negotiation, there was a danger in spending too much time at this stage discussing the detail of each paper. What was needed first was the identification of broad outlines. It was also necessary to consider not only what system was appropriate for the immediate situation but how it might evolve in the future. The UUP saw a difficulty with regard to the stability of any power sharing executive and would ask the Alliance to re-examine that aspect of their proposals. It was desirable to avoid being over-ambitious with regard to the type of institutions which might be established. The more ambitious the structures, the greater the stresses to which they would be subjected.

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5. The UUP delegation sought clarification of the future role of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in the Alliance proposals. Was his role confined to the formation of the Executive? Would he continue to act as the Northern Ireland voice in the Cabinet?

6. The Alliance delegation said that they envisaged that the Secretary of State would continue to represent Northern Ireland in the Cabinet.

7. The SDLP delegation asked the Alliance how much importance they attached to the Executive. The Alliance delegation replied that because of the divisions in Northern Ireland it was necessary for each tradition to see its representatives operating with real power at the highest level.

8. The UUP delegation asked whether this meant that the Alliance saw the Executive merely as a public relations exercise. The UUP proposal was for a lower key structure but one which was more likely to be workable. The Alliance delegation replied that they did not see the Executive as having a purely presentational purpose.

9. The DUP delegation said that they accepted the need for the two traditions to be represented at the highest level but it was not realistic to have a Cabinet style executive operating on the basis of collective responsibility. There was no need for an elaborate system of Government for a small area such as Northern Ireland.

10. The Government Team asked about the power of individual Executive members under the Alliance proposals. What would an Executive member of a minority party, for example, do if he failed in getting proposals for legislation approved by the Executive and the Assembly?

11. The Alliance delegation replied that an Executive member clearly had to carry the other members with him. The Executive as a whole would have to reach agreement about what proposals were to be adopted, but this did not require acceptance of "collective responsibility", whereby all members of the Executive were required to speak with one voice once a decision had been taken.

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12. The SDLP delegation said that this arrangement was characteristic of any form of coalition government. The Government Team commented that it was one of the weaknesses of coalition that participating parties had to set aside certain aspects of the policies on which they had been elected, so as to secure agreement with their partners.

13. The SDLP delegation responded that coalition government was not necessarily weak government. It could be argued that a coalition was a source of strength if it was based on a wide degree of electoral support, in contrast to single-party Government based on less than 50% of the vote, as was the case with the present Conservative Government. While the "first past the post" electoral system might be appropriate for a cohesive society like Great Britain, it did not work in a divided society such as Northern Ireland.

14. The Government Team made clear that in pointing out the weaknesses inherent in coalition, they were not expressing opposition to the concept of power sharing.

15. The UUP delegation expressed concern about the use of phrases such as "Government" and "Ministers". It was important to keep matters in perspective and not look for over-elaborate institutional structures.

16. The DUP delegation asked how far the Alliance proposals were compatible with the requirements of accountability and scrutiny. If all parties were represented in the Cabinet or Executive, there would effectively be no opposition, since back bench members would be reluctant to challenge decisions taken by their leaders. The Alliance delegation replied that in the old Assembly, there had been frequent disagreements between party leaders and their back bench colleagues. The DUP commented that this could have been because the Assembly had no power, unlike the Executive envisaged in the Alliance proposals.

17. The SDLP delegation expressed concern that there was no explicit reference in the Alliance paper to the wider relationships which were the root of the problem. How did the Alliance envisage these relationships impacting on their proposed institutional structures? Were these questions to be consigned to the later strands of the talks? Relationships were central to the nature of the two traditions. They could not just be looked at as an external matter. The Alliance delegation confirmed that their paper was designed to address Strand I issues. The issues raised by the SDLP would be addressed when the other strands were reached.

18. The DUP delegation noted the Alliance Party's proposals on finance and said they would wish to discuss these at the appropriate time.

19. The SDLP delegation said that there would be a need for a detailed discussion at some stage of questions such as a Bill of Rights. The Government Team commented that this might be an appropriate subject for a separate sub-Committee.

20. The Government Team proposed that, discussion of the Alliance paper having been concluded, the meeting should adjourn until 2.00 pm, when the SDLP paper would be discussed.

TALKS SECRETARIAT