

DRAFT SUMMARY RECORD OF OPENING PLENARY SESSION -
TUESDAY 9 SEPTEMBER 1997 (12.08)

Those present:

INDEPENDENT CHAIRMEN	GOVERNMENT TEAMS	PARTIES
Senator Mitchell	British Government	Alliance
Mr Holkeri	Irish Government	Labour
General de Chastelain		Northern Ireland Women's Coalition
		Sinn Féin
		Social Democratic & Labour Party

1. The Chairman convened the meeting at 12.08. He stated, on behalf on his colleagues, that he was pleased to be back following the summer break and to resume discussions which hopefully would ultimately lead to the establishment of peace, political stability and reconciliation which the people of Northern Ireland wanted and deserved. As to the first business of the day, the Chairman stated that this would be the affirmation by Sinn Féin of the principles of democracy and non violence as contained in paragraph 20 of the Report of the International Body.

2. The Chairman, in addressing the Sinn Féin delegation, said that the past practice of affirmation had comprised him reading aloud the principles and then asking a representative from the delegation to respond in the affirmative to the party's commitment in the presence of the two Governments and the other political parties present. The Chairman said that barring no objections he would now read aloud paragraphs 19 and 20 of the Report of the International Body and ask Sinn Féin to respond. The Chairman proceeded with this.

3. Sinn Féin said it welcomed the opportunity to be present at the plenary session and to affirm its commitment to the previously outlined principles. Sinn Féin also indicated its wish to make a longer statement at some point during the session.

4. The Chairman said that with regard to Sinn Féin's request to make a statement it had been his practice, following previous breaks in the process, to permit all participants on their return to make a statement on any aspect of the discussions. Sinn Féin would be included in this in the usual manner of a tour de table which would begin shortly. In the interim the Chairman stated that, on behalf of his colleagues, he wished to welcome Sinn Féin to the process and looked forward to the party's active participation in the negotiations. The Chairman then asked the British Government to commence the tour de table.

5. The British Government said it wished to extend a welcome to Sinn Féin today on the occasion of their entry to the talks. Their participation had been made possible by the restoration of the IRA cease-fire on 20 July. The Secretary of State, after due consideration of all relevant evidence, accepted that it had marked an unequivocal restoration of the IRA cease-fire of August 1994. The British Government said that the restoration of the cease-fire had enabled Sinn Féin to take its seat alongside the other parties which received a mandate in the May elections of 1996. Like them, Sinn Féin had now affirmed its commitment to the six Mitchell Principles of democracy and non violence.

6. The British Government stated that Sinn Féin commitment to the Mitchell Principles ensured that all participants in the talks were on an equal footing in a forum where the force of argument replaced the threat of force. Everyone could now look forward to the real possibility of a fully inclusive talks process involving the representatives of the whole range of thought and opinion in Northern Ireland. The British Government said, however that it was disappointing that not all the participants were present today. It was however committed to the talks moving into substantive negotiations towards a comprehensive and widely acceptable settlement. It sincerely hoped that the unionists would be present on Monday 15 September so that every party would take the opportunity to use the process to achieve a new beginning for

Northern Ireland in which people could be confident that their views would be represented and their identities respected.

7. The Irish Government welcomed the Chairman and his colleagues back after the summer break and thanked everyone for their efforts during the summer. The Irish Government said it welcomed the entry of Sinn Féin into the negotiations today, following the unequivocal restoration of the 1994 IRA cease-fire and the decision by the Secretary of State, which it fully supported, that Sinn Féin had established a commitment to exclusively peaceful means and that it (Sinn Féin) had shown that it abided by the democratic process. The Irish Government said it had always been the aim to have negotiations fully inclusive of all the relevant parties which conformed to the basic norms of democracy. The Irish Government said it now had, open before everyone, the unprecedented prospect of genuinely inclusive negotiations, conducted in an atmosphere of peace. As the Chairman had emphasised, this was a combination and a set of circumstances that had not occurred since the Northern Ireland troubles commenced almost 30 years ago. Indeed, the negotiations had the capacity to be the most significant since those which led to the Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1921.

8. The Irish Government said it welcomed the participation of Sinn Féin in the process. It hoped that all eligible parties would now participate because it was through dialogue and negotiation between the representatives of all the significant currents of opinion that everyone could both address and resolve the differences which had divided the people of this country for so long. As the Taoiseach had said last Friday night, it would be sadly ironic if, now that all the passengers had a ticket and the train was about to leave the station, some of the passengers who had been on the train for some time were to step back down onto the platform. The Irish Government said that no party should allow the interests of those it represented to go by default. The overwhelming wish of the people throughout Ireland, North and South, was that all parties would engage fully in the process of

negotiation. It hoped that the historic opportunity to play a part in the definition of a lasting accommodation would be seized by the representatives of the Unionist tradition.

9. The Irish Government said that Sinn Féin had now, as all the other participants did previously, made clear, in open session in these talks, their total and absolute commitment to the six Mitchell Principles. The Irish Government said it greatly welcomed that declaration which was a watershed in the history and politics of Ireland. In this connection, the Irish Government said it wanted to underline the very exacting nature of the Mitchell Principles. The Principles were no empty formula. They called for a deep and permanent dedication to exclusively peaceful, political methods. The commitment to accept and adhere to the Mitchell Principles was something that was taken very seriously indeed by it and the British Government.

10. The Irish Government said that to have reached a situation where all the relevant parties had committed themselves to these principles was a major step forward. Sinn Féin's participation in the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation in Dublin demonstrated the commitment, the seriousness and the dedicated hard work which its delegations brought to a process of dialogue. The Irish Government said it had no doubt that those qualities would be seen again in the substantive political negotiations that were to be launched on Monday next, 15 September.

11. The Irish Government said that those delegations who had been here since the beginning, 15 months ago, knew how the process had so far been beset with frustration and delay. It wanted to compliment all those delegations on their dedication, patience and perseverance. The conditions were now in place to leave all that behind. An historic opportunity now existed to bring about a balanced, comprehensive and durable agreement, founded on the principle of consent, that would command the widest possible support and acceptance across nationalists and unionists in

Northern Ireland, on the island as a whole and in Britain. This was a time for all the eligible participants to put their shoulder to the wheel and to create new options to put before the people of Ireland in referenda, North and South, for their approval. The two Governments were determined not to let this opportunity pass. The Irish Government appealed to all parties to join with it in ensuring that it was seized for the benefit of all the people of Ireland and throughout these islands.

12. Alliance welcomed back the Chairman and his colleagues. The party said it very much valued the commitment which each had given to the process to date. It had not been an easy task but each of the Chairmen had experienced other problems in the past and had brought their skills to bear in getting these resolved. Alliance said it very much hoped that the session would make progress towards peace and reconciliation. The party said that at the beginning of the summer things had looked very bleak in Northern Ireland. Early problems with the marching season had fortunately led, in due course, to wiser counsels prevailing in the community and with the cease-fire announcement in mid July, there was now a much better atmosphere around. This position was welcome and provided encouraging news for all concerned both in the talks process and on the ground outside.

13. Alliance said it also wished to welcome Sinn Féin to the process. It had of course worked with the party previously in the Dublin Forum and it was good to renew that acquaintance again. Alliance said it was disappointing that none of the unionist parties were present but sincerely hoped that some would return to the process as soon as possible. The party said it had to be remembered that the plenary session today had been called to try and resolve the issue of decommissioning. With this in mind the party believed that with Sinn Féin now joining the process, it would be helpful if copies of the Alliance proposals on decommissioning, first produced in October 1996, were made available to that party. Alliance said it very much hoped that

other delegations would copy their proposals on decommissioning to Sinn Féin, to enable the latter to be brought up to speed on the current position. The party stressed that the proposals of the two Governments which had failed to achieve sufficient consensus in July should also be included in this sharing of information. Sinn Féin had to be facilitated and made aware of what had happened so far on the decommissioning issue, to enable it to understand the key points on each side.

14. Alliance added, in relation to another aspect of decommissioning that it would be helpful to hear from both Governments what the latest position was, particularly in relation to the appointments to the International Commission. The party said it hoped that these would be made soon. It also had another proposal to air but would not raise it until the Governments had responded to the points just raised. The Chairman suggested that both Governments could respond to Alliance's questions on completion of the tour de table.

15. Turning to a separate issue, Alliance said it wished to put forward another proposal which had its roots in the previous talks process of 1991. The party said that one had to bear in mind that the political future of Northern Ireland was not an exclusive issue for the politicians alone but was an issue of real importance to the people. In 1991, it had been proposed by Alliance that greater openness be brought to the discussions, thus giving the press and media greater opportunity to participate in the process in a constructive rather than destructive manner. Consequently the party proposed that the plenary sessions of those talks be made available for television use.

16. Alliance said that, at the time, some colleagues didn't consider this to be appropriate, but the party felt that 6 years further on there was now a greater appreciation of the role the media could perform. The party said it therefore formally wished to propose that the plenary sessions in the current process be made

available for television use. There were many details to be worked out as to the practicalities of this and consequently it was inappropriate for the plenary itself to be involved in such detail. However such consideration could be undertaken by the Business Committee which could investigate all aspects and report back on its conclusions to the plenary. Alliance said it believed that a good deal of positiveness about the process could be communicated to those on the ground using this facility. The party had received many positive remarks about its proposal since it was first mooted after a meeting with the Prime Minister some days earlier.

17. The Chairman said he would ensure that the Chairman of the Business Committee would have the issue placed on the agenda for its next meeting. Labour also welcomed the Chairman and his colleagues back following the summer recess. The party said it wished to thank both Governments for the hard work over the summer which had culminated in the present situation. Labour said that the red letter day for it had been the announcement of the IRA cease-fire on 20 July. This provided the opportunity for everyone to sit down and move forward in an attempt to reach a settlement. The party said it was a matter of some regret that no unionists were present today. Labour said that while it understood the unionist position to some degree, it took the view that, following a bilateral with Sinn Féin the previous day, there would be a need for imaginative action on everyone's part to try to bind up the wounds which had occurred over 25 years so that agreement might be reached. It had to be remembered that people didn't forget easily in Northern Ireland.

18. Labour said it welcomed Sinn Féin to the process. It was extremely important that they were present - a position which had been advocated by the party on numerous occasions in the past. Sinn Féin had to be present because they were part of the solution. Labour said that during its bilateral the previous day with Sinn Féin, the latter had spoken of continuing problems on the ground. There were those in local communities who were still suffering

harassment from the security forces. Labour said these incidents needed to be closely monitored. Important issues and problems such as this needed to be got out onto the table quickly so that they could be discussed and dealt with. Some mechanism such as a central incident centre might be considered by the NIO to assist in this process. As had been mentioned earlier in the session on another topic, it wasn't simply the politicians who were involved in the political future of Northern Ireland but the people as well and if problems such as those highlighted were not dealt with properly, they would colour the atmosphere of working towards a solution acceptable to everyone. Labour said it recognised that the major onus was on the participants to reach such a settlement. There was a big responsibility on Sinn Féin as well, but the vital issue was that everyone needed to be present together to try to move the process forward and hopefully achieve agreement.

19. The NIWC also welcomed back the Chairman and his colleagues. The party said that it was a significant day in that all parties to the talks had now signed up to the Mitchell Principles. The NIWC said it welcomed Sinn Féin into the process. It was sorry, however, that the unionist parties were not present to witness the adherence of the final party to those Mitchell Principles. The NIWC said it awaited the UUP decision. It said it would welcome them taking up the opportunity to move centre stage to represent what the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland wanted - people from right across both sides of the community - that the UUP should come to the table. The NIWC said it looked forward to seeing them present next week.

20. The party said it had always argued for an inclusive process and for the opportunity of inclusion to be taken up. The party said it wished to see the DUP back as well, sitting across the table from it. It also wished to see the UKUP returning. The NIWC said it wished to draw attention to paragraph 20 (e) of the Mitchell Principles "to agree to abide by the terms of any agreement reached in all-party negotiations". The NIWC said it had

made it clear from the outset its absolute commitment to inclusion so that the process was truly all-party. The party said it wished to reiterate that today. The major task that now lay ahead of everyone was to work together for an agreement that all could consent to.

21. Sinn Féin said it wished to thank everyone for their one hundred thousand welcomes. The party said it too recognised that this was an important gathering and an important step in the search for lasting peace in Ireland. Sinn Féin said it was a matter of some regret that it had taken so long to reach this point but part of that problem was that it required a great deal of patience and thoughtfulness to move the process forward in small steps. The party said everyone needed to be absolutely focused in moving with all speed into substantive issues. That was Sinn Féin's commitment. The party said it welcomed the opportunity to look at Alliance's proposals on decommissioning. It had outlined its position on the issue in the submission presented to the International Body and the party's attitude went much further than the Mitchell Principles on this.

22. Sinn Féin said that unfortunately the British Government narrowed the brief of the International Body. For example on the issue of weapons, Sinn Féin said it wanted to take all the guns out of Irish politics. The party did not have a sectional view. It wanted a total demilitarisation of the situation. Sinn Féin said it wanted total disarmament and on the issue of prisoners it wanted all of them released. The party said it felt that the British Government should look at the issue of prisoners with generosity and particularly on some of the concerns of the smaller loyalist parties in a spirit of moving forward. Sinn Féin stated that the main objective of its peace strategy was removing the causes of conflict to allow for the resolution of political issues by democrats and peaceful means.

23. Sinn Féin said it wanted to remind the British Government that it was present on the basis of its electoral mandate to put forward its Irish republican analysis. The party said it was pleased that London had affirmed the Mitchell Principles but was concerned that there had been serious breaches in particular over the summer and it hoped these would end. Sinn Féin said the process would be challenging for everyone. The party was disappointed that there were empty chairs. It hoped the unionist leaders could be here as soon as possible and everyone could find a way to get agreement that reflected the diversity of all the people. Sinn Féin said it would like the process to be transparent and all the people of the island to take possession of it. They had a vested interest in a lasting peace and the issues involved were too important to be left to the people in the process. If there was a way to get a process which was organic, which was dynamic, everyone could move forward.

24. Sinn Féin, in addressing the chairpersons and all the parties, said it acknowledged everyone's commitment to the process and wished everyone luck. It was important that everyone came into the process with an eye to the future. It could bog down but it was important to always look forward and to get a mind of good will behind the efforts. That was certainly Sinn Féin's intention so it wished good luck to everyone present and to those who were absent.

25. The SDLP welcomed back the Chairmen and his colleagues and thanked each for their great patience and commitment to the process thus far. The party said it also, like others in the room, welcomed Sinn Féin to the talks for the first time. The SDLP said that this was indeed an historic occasion since it was the first time that both Governments had brought all the political parties around the table to talk about future political structures under the three strands of relationships previously identified. The party said it hoped that very soon the process would be able to step beyond the issue of decommissioning and start to deal with the substantive issues. The SDLP said it hoped the unionists would return next week and begin to deal with the real issues. The

Chairman, having completed the tour de table, said he was grateful to learn that the SDLP leader would be remaining with the process for the foreseeable future. The Chairman, recalling previous procedures on responding to questions raised by participants, for the benefit of Sinn Féin, asked the British Government whether it now wished to respond to the earlier points raised by Alliance, Labour and Sinn Féin.

26. The British Government said it would respond. In relation to the concerns raised by Labour and Sinn Féin about continuing problems on the ground, it said that it had discussed these at a meeting with Sinn Féin the previous day. These concerns would be dealt with by the Minister responsible for security matters. They could also be raised at the Subcommittee on Confidence Building Measures which could be established in accordance with the Governments' proposal - a mechanism which would allow all participants to make points and hear them as well.

27. With respect to the Alliance request for a briefing on developments in relation to decommissioning, the British Government reported that, having received the report of the Independent Body in January 1996, the British and Irish Governments had worked closely together on the legislation needed to provide for decommissioning. The respective Bills were passed in both jurisdictions and became law in February this year. On 26 August the two Governments signed the International Agreement establishing the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning. They had also jointly approached the Governments of Finland, the United States and Canada for nominations for members of the Commission.

28. The two Governments would be writing to all the parties shortly with details of the nominees put forward by those Governments. The British Government said that the persons nominated were all of a very high calibre. The two Governments had made arrangements to brief these "Commissioners Designate" later in the week, and this would mean that the Commission would be in a

position to commence work on a full operational basis alongside the launch of substantive negotiations, in line with the commitments made by the two Governments earlier in the year. The Irish Government concurred with the outline given by the British Government.

29. Alliance said this outline was helpful and encouraging and welcomed the commitment that the Commission would be operational by 15 September. This information would be very encouraging to the public and the party enquired if it could be made public today. Alliance also asked whether the International Commission could report back to the Plenary after one month both on its progress and also to indicate any requirements it might have, such as further legislation or other practical matters, in order to ensure it could fully discharge its task.

30. The British Government said that the exact details of the procedure to review the work of the International Commission was not settled, as the proposals of the two Governments in this regard had not obtained sufficient consensus. The intention that the work of the Commission be regularly reviewed by the Plenary, however, was clear. On the question of publicity, the British Government felt it would be unwise to release the names of the proposed Commissioners now, before all arrangements with the sending Governments were completed and all participants in the talks were notified by letter, but that the general position with regard to the Commission could be made known. The Irish Government agreed with Alliance that, except for the names of the nominees, as much information as possible should be given to the public about the International Commission. It also assured Alliance that the two Governments would co operate fully with the International Commission and ensure that it had all resources or any other assistance it needed to carry out its work.

31. The SDLP pointed out that the liaison mechanism between the Plenary and the International Commission was to be a subcommittee

which had yet to be set up, but that the Plenary was unable to establish the subcommittee until the present impasse over decommissioning was resolved.

32. Alliance said it would be helpful to receive copies of Sinn Féin's proposals in these areas, so that it might study them. The party also wished to explore briefly a comment in the remarks by Sinn Féin which seemed to have broader implications. Alliance noted Sinn Féin's emphasis on removing all guns from the situation, including not just those of the republican and loyalist paramilitaries, but also those of the RUC and British Army. Alliance asked if this meant, and if Sinn Féin was proposing, that the Irish Army also be stood down, so that there would be no military organisation present on the island.

33. Sinn Féin said that decommissioning was an important issue, and that it was important to establish the International Commission and move forward with all possible speed. The party looked also to the two Governments who had promised that this issue would not be a blockage to or in negotiations. The issues, however, facing the participants related not just to weapons, but included also the constitution, governance and equality. Sinn Féin had not mentioned the Irish Army, which was not present in the six counties, and was thus not a concern of these talks. The participants in the talks had been victims of republican, loyalist or British violence. It was important not to take a sectional view. Sinn Féin also referred to the continued involvement of British military intelligence with loyalists, the use of plastic bullets during the summer and the helicopter which had shadowed the party's delegation on its way to the Plenary. West Belfast had not seen a calming down of involvement by British forces. The party was working for a comprehensive settlement of all issues, including that of weapons. Alliance said this was an encouraging and helpful response, of profound significance. The Chairman asked whether there were any other comments.

34. Alliance said that its proposal that the plenary be televised was a serious one. Televising of proceedings had been helpful to the peace process in South Africa, for instance, and had worked well in the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation in Dublin Castle. The party was not suggesting that live broadcasts were the answer but that the press should have access to the full balance of what was being said, and be able to use it as it chose, rather than having to rely on the often inaccurate and unchallengeable reports of participants given outside the gates. Alliance felt the people should be able to see what was going on in their name. It also felt that televising the proceedings might also encourage some of those not currently present to return to the Plenary. It hoped the proposal could be considered further.

35. The SDLP said it had doubts about the proposal, and had opposed it in the past in other fora. There was a tendency for televised sessions to become set pieces. The honesty of debate was the important issue here and televising the proceedings might curtail this. Sinn Féin said that it had called for the process to be made more transparent, but that it was also important to allow space for real negotiations. Different ways could be considered to improve transparency without encroaching on this necessary space. It asked if there would be a facility for observers from other jurisdictions to come and watch the proceedings. Persons from other conflict resolution processes might wish to be observers, for example.

36. The NIWC said that the issue of informing the public had been discussed in 1996, in view of the conflicting accounts given to journalists at the gates, and it had been considered that the Chairmen might make periodic statements on progress or developments. Alliance's proposal should be considered in the Business Committee rather than the Plenary, not least because participants themselves needed an opportunity to consider it first. The NIWC was in favour of increased transparency, but its

experience in the Forum did not encourage it to think that the presence of TV cameras at the Plenary would be helpful.

37. The Chairman put all participants on notice that the question of televising the proceedings would be reviewed at the first meeting of the Business Committee. He then adjourned the plenary,

with the concurrence of the participants, at 13.02 until 14.00 on Monday 15 September.

**Independent Chairmen Notetakers
12 September 1997**

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