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Hunt ~~has~~
Councilors A-I

MR J. Finlay

Mr J. Hayes

O/Sce O'Halligan

FAX

Mr J. Dalton

Mr J. Murray

Mr S. Doran

Mr P. Teahan

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10 May 1995

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TO:

BQ

FROM:

BELFAST

FOR:

David Donohue

FROM:

Sean Farrell

SUBJECT: _____

COMMENTS:

- Press Release

- Opening Statement

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PRESS RELEASE

EXPLORATORY DIALOGUE

10 MAY 1995

The sixth meeting between the Government and Sinn Fein was held today. The Government side was led by the Minister of State, Michael Ancram MP.

In opening the meeting, the Minister welcomed the resumption of exploratory dialogue. He believed the Government now had the assurances they had sought from Sinn Fein and he looked forward to his participation facilitating and accelerating constructive discussion of the key issues, including the decommissioning of arms. His opening statement is attached.

There followed a serious and constructive discussion on the decommissioning of arms. Sinn Fein reaffirmed their commitment to exclusively peaceful and constitutional methods, and to bringing about the removal of all weapons, including IRA weapons, from Irish politics. The Minister explained why the Government attached such importance to the issue. As the Downing Street Declaration made clear it is "democratically mandated parties which establish a commitment to exclusively peaceful methods and which have shown that they abide by the democratic process" which can be brought into political dialogue. Accordingly the Government wanted to explore how decommissioning could be achieved. There was a helpful initial exploration of the issue and it was agreed to discuss the issue again at a future meeting on the basis of a paper which the Government tabled, covering such issues as methods of decommissioning, verification, the possibility of independent supervision, practical and legal considerations, and timing.

Both sides agreed that it was in the interests of everyone that all illegal arms and explosives should be removed as soon as possible, and that the establishment of an atmosphere of trust was crucial in achieving that. Both sides agreed to use their influence to seek to ensure an outcome on these lines.

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The meeting discussed a number of other issues, including Sinn Fein's view that they should be treated equally with other parties on the basis of their electoral mandate. The Minister said that the Government had made it plain that it accepted that Sinn Fein had an electoral mandate and that its voters had the same rights as people supporting any other party. The Minister repeated that the Government wanted to see Sinn Fein enter normal political life in Northern Ireland. Following the progress that had enabled the entry of Ministers into the dialogue, and on the basis that the dialogue would continue, he indicated that the Government would be ready to consider requests from Sinn Fein representatives to meet Ministers and officials on their merits.

Sinn Fein also raised some issues under the heading of "Demilitarising Society".

The Minister also condemned so-called punishment beatings and other intimidation and pressed for Sinn Fein's influence to be used to bring these to a permanent end.

Michael Ancram offered dates for a further meeting next week, which Sinn Fein agreed to consider.

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OPENING STATEMENT

This is the first meeting in the exploratory dialogue with Sinn Fein at which the Government has been represented by a Minister. It has been made possible by Sinn Fein's confirmation that you will seek to be genuinely constructive in addressing the key issues, including arms decommissioning, and will join in an exploration of the ways by which this can most effectively be achieved, and do so with a view to resolving the issues.

I understand, and hope, it is our shared view that my presence here will facilitate and accelerate constructive discussions and a successful outcome on the key issues, including decommissioning of arms. My involvement, as a Minister, represents a clear strengthening and deepening of the dialogue, and demonstrates once again the Government's commitment to the peace process. I can state clearly that I am here with the firm objective of making real and soundly based progress with you on the many issues which require resolution.

There has been some frustration at the long delay since our last meeting. But now we have the assurances necessary to proceed, I hope we can resume the constructive discussion of issues which characterised the meetings at official level.

In the interests of achieving this I hope that we will speak to each other clearly and frankly, that we will be prepared to face up to political realities and that we will not become embroiled in semantic rhetoric or word jousting. The people of this country expect and deserve more than that.

The Government recognises Sinn Fein's electoral support and your right to advocate your views peacefully.

As we said in our original opening statement, on 9 December, HMG shares your objective that Sinn Fein should come to play a normal role in the political life of Northern Ireland, and in particular in

inclusive talks. We believe that successful completion of the exploratory dialogue, including among other important matters substantial progress on arms decommissioning, will enable Sinn Fein to achieve those objectives.

But participation in normal political life implies responsibilities as well as rights. A party fully committed to constitutional means and objectives does not intimidate and threaten the population, does not encourage people to take the law into their own hands, or condone the breaking of people's bones with iron bars.

And they do not, and I have to say this, mount deliberate and violent confrontations with the police, the most serious but far from the first of which was organised last Wednesday in Londonderry.

Above all, inclusive talks can only take place in an atmosphere of confidence, which can lead to parallel progress in a number of areas. We are clear that substantial progress on the decommissioning of illegally held arms and explosives is essential to this process. Decommissioning is not a new hurdle invented by Government, but the desire of both parties and people in Northern Ireland. None of us are in any doubt that it is a complex and difficult issue: it is, however, one which needs to be resolved to the satisfaction of all concerned if we are to continue to move forward.

We are not pursuing a single-issue agenda. We have made clear our readiness to discuss a wide range of issues. But not can we avoid the particular issue of decommissioning.

This is not an issue which can be resolved overnight. I certainly do not expect to resolve it today. I am sure we shall have to return to it, though by no means at every meeting.

Over the course of the dialogue we shall be pressing for a number of things you have heard us say publicly:

- A willingness in principle to disarm progressively;
- A common practical understanding of the modalities, that is to say, what decommissioning would actually entail, and how such decommissioning could be verified in such a way as to maximise public confidence in the process;
- In order to test the practical arrangements and to demonstrate good faith, the actual decommissioning of some arms as a tangible confidence-building measure and to signal the start of a process.

Since our exploratory dialogue began, Northern Ireland has enjoyed the benefits of peace, as a result of the continued absence of violence from both republican and loyalist groups. And this in turn has allowed the security forces on the ground to scale down the volume and character of their deployment activities considerably, thus further contributing to an atmosphere of normality.

This is the sixth meeting between our two sides. Previously we have covered a wide range of issues. Opening the first meeting, the Government side expressed our aim to "look for the common ground and seek to enlarge it, looking for points of agreement and ways of building trust". I endorse that and I believe that exploratory dialogue has begun to fulfil our expectations and I look forward to continuing that progress.

10 May 1995