



An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

Reference Code: 2021/50/269

Creator(s): Department of Foreign Affairs

Accession Conditions: Open

Copyright: National Archives, Ireland. May only be reproduced with the written permission of the Director of the National Archives.

Visit of Tony Blair, MP
Political Developments in Northern Ireland
Steering Note

1. The visit of the Labour leader, whose party continue to be strong favourites to win the next British general election, offers a useful opportunity to reiterate to him and his team at first hand the basic approach we take to the peace process. This is all the more so given, first, that it looks increasingly unlikely that the situation will have developed much in any positive sense before a new British Government takes office, and, secondly, that he has been, while quietly sympathetic, characteristically cautious about opening any gaps between himself and Mr Major on key issues.

IRA Ceasefire/Position of Sinn Féin

2. The Government have strongly held to the view that a durable settlement is most likely to be achieved in conditions of peace and as a result of an inclusive process, irrespective of the undoubtedly very great difficulties involved in inducing the unionists to talk with Sinn Féin. Consequently, we have had, as a priority, the restoration of the IRA ceasefire and the consequent admission of Sinn Féin to a fully inclusive talks process. Our view has been that there should be a definitive and clear understanding on how this might happen, and therefore we supported the efforts of John Hume to find a formula acceptable both to the British Government and Sinn Féin.
3. The British Prime Minister, in his statement of 28 November, spelled out tests which he would apply to determine whether "any new ceasefire would be intended to be genuinely unequivocal, i.e. lasting and not simply a tactical device." He also described a process of contacts which would culminate in the entry of Sinn Féin to the talks, if all the requirements were met. Beyond saying that "sufficient time would have to be taken" he declined to commit himself to any definite timescale. He has subsequently, including at the press conference following the Anglo-Irish Summit of 9 December, said that he would not envisage "undue delay", but has not been prepared to go further.
4. After the Anglo-Irish Summit, which failed to bridge the gap between the two Governments, the Taoiseach summarised our position as being "that if the IRA clearly calls an unequivocal

ceasefire, in words that are believable, and provided there is nothing done that is inconsistent with this ceasefire or with the Mitchell Principles, then Sinn Féin should be admitted to participation in the talks, in accordance with the ground rules.” We have suggested that creative use might be made of a Christmas recess in the talks to this end.

5. In addition to its content, the Prime Minister’s decision to proceed to publication of his statement on 28 November, despite requests that he should delay it pending further soundings, has been widely interpreted as being motivated primarily by a desire to reassure the unionists and his own backbenches. This in turn has added to republican mistrust.
6. The IRA’s precise intentions remain a matter of speculation. There is no absolute certainty that a restatement of the two Governments’ joint position, along the lines we advocated, would have led to an unequivocal and credible ceasefire, but for the present it seems likely that this prospect has become less, rather than more, probable. It has to be hoped that the present lull in violence will be maintained, though media and other reports are disquieting. There is also, however, a school of thought which argues that the potential political advantages to be gained by Sinn Fein from a ceasefire are so great as to point to a restoration at some stage before the Westminster and local elections.

Talks/Decommissioning

7. Since the resumption of the talks in September, the talks have been stalled on the issue of decommissioning. The two Governments remain jointly committed to the implementation of the Mitchell Report in all its aspects as the best way forward. We have been prepared to explore possible routes forward, within the parameters of Mitchell. In particular, at present, the possible early creation of an International commission is being examined, most actively between the UUP, Alliance and SDLP.
8. The British Government have been suggesting to us that the Commission might be given a role in determining the timing of decommissioning, but we have resisted this suggestion as impractical and as seeming to depart from the vital linkage between political progress and decommissioning. We have argued that timing will ultimately be a question for political judgement, not that of military experts; that the paramilitaries are likely to decommission when they judge that it is in their political interests to build confidence by doing so; and that

an ill-timed recommendation, if not evincing a positive paramilitary response, would almost inevitably lead to a unionist walkout.

8. The UUP's performance has been confused and contradictory. On the one hand, they have been prepared to enter into protracted discussions on possible ways forward. On the other hand, they have hardened their public position, suggesting, in what is to all intents and purposes a return to Washington Three, that decommissioning should begin before the launch of negotiations on substantive issues in the three strands. Their negotiating teams have seemed poorly coordinated and inconsistent. It is clear that they feel under great political pressure from both the DUP and UKUP, the latter of whom in particular make no secret of their desire to collapse the talks process. Moreover, as both the Westminster and local elections come closer (in particular as there is speculation that the British Government might not in fact last until May) any room for manoeuvre will disappear.
9. Thus, while open to any viable strategy for an exit out of the decommissioning issue and into substantive negotiations, we do not wish to be ratcheted upwards by the UUP in the direction of a reinstated Washington Three precondition, which would be politically unsaleable on the nationalist side, would contradict our consistent analysis, and which might not even then permit genuine unionist engagement.
10. Overall, it seems unlikely that there will be significant progress on substantive issues before a British election, even if some means of handling decommissioning were agreed. Therefore our principal objective may be the preservation of the negotiating structures and procedures which have been so carefully elaborated, and the retention of the Mitchell report as the basic blueprint on decommissioning, with a view to a renewal of the process later on. Despite the other possibilities which have been floated from time to time, there is little apparent alternative in the long run to all-party negotiations.

Anglo-Irish Division
Department of Foreign Affairs

10 December 1996