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***Meeting with the Alliance Party,
Government Buildings,
Friday, 24 May, 1996,***

1. Dr. Alderdice opened the meeting by describing the election campaign as "fairly low-key" and admitting that it was not as polarised as he had expected. He wasn't worried about a low turnout and expected a poll somewhere in the region of 50-60 %. He believed that the Alliance vote was pretty solid and that the five main parties would poll much as usual. Pointing out that Trimble was very worried, he believed that it was not impossible that the SDLP could turn out to be the largest party. The Taoiseach commented that it would be ironic if the people who looked for the election did worse than those opposed to it.
2. Dr. Alderdice stressed that the post-election scenario was their main concern. They wanted to ensure that "things were lined up for 10 June". Outlining his main areas of concern he asked how is the decommissioning issue to be dealt with, how should it be linked to the talks process and can we get a ceasefire before then?. He mentioned a slight concern he had regarding movement towards a ceasefire. He suspected that there might be an attempt to have a "big spectacular" before calling a ceasefire in order "to keep all the lads on board". The overwhelming emotional reaction in Britain he believed would be totally against Sinn Féin's subsequent participation in talks.

3. Putting forward the Alliance view on decommissioning, he said that they wanted to keep it as separate as possible from the political track - to keep as much distance as possible between the two whilst accepting that there has to be progress in both. They see decommissioning as a "process". It would not be enough, in their judgement, to say it will happen at the end.

4. Responding to the points outlined by Alderdice the Taoiseach agreed that the effects of a "spectacular" by the IRA would be "quite incalculable" and worried him greatly. Close asked if there was any suggestion that there might ^{be a} split. The Taoiseach replied that he didn't think they would and in a certain sense that was a good thing. However difficult it might be they will bring the whole movement with them.

5. The Taoiseach then proceeded to give a general outline of the Government's position. At present work is taking place on two tracks. While there has been intensive work on the first track - trying through Sinn Féin to get the IRA to reinstate the ceasefire - there have been no results so far. On the second track, involving the British Government, we have been trying to build on the Ground Rules document, to get more specific understandings. We have been endeavouring to agree what is going to be said and what is not going to be said about decommissioning. We are also discussing other issues such as procedures, chairmanships, etc. The Taoiseach admitted that some aspects were difficult. He

thought that the British might be wary of settling this before the election for fear of being seen to affect the election results.

Strictly speaking these matters could be sorted out at the talks but he believed it was desirable to settle as much as possible before then. He was very concerned that the British Government might come in at a late stage and ask the parties to sign up to parallel decommissioning of arms before talks even began. He pointed out that Mitchell doesn't agree with this. He referred to the report of the International Body where it states that parties "should consider an approach under which some decommissioning would take place during the process of all-party negotiations", that it was not a matter on which prior conditions should be set. Anything, he emphasised, that smacked of preconditions is not desirable.

6. Referring to his meeting with David Trimble, the Taoiseach described it as "short but full". He had formed the impression that Trimble was in "negotiating mode whilst holding a firm position". The SDLP meeting had confirmed to him that the party have gone in a good direction in their attitude to the Forum which he believed was a reasonably good sign.

7. Dr. Alderdice responded that they take great encouragement from the fact that firstly everyone is fighting the election and secondly that the SDLP have indicated that they will participate in the Forum. He didn't see it as impossible that Sinn Féin might also participate. He agreed with the Taoiseach's assessment of

Trimble and he himself believed that Trimble engaged in the process much more than his predecessor ever did.

8. On the question of talks and decommissioning he thought it preferable if the two Governments were able to reach agreement in advance. However he emphasised the sensitivity of timing. He advised that it would be worthwhile considering the possible dangers of meeting to address that issue in advance of elections. Referring to the meeting scheduled for Tuesday, he believed that if the matter was not resolved and the Irish Government made a public statement on it, Ian Paisley would use that to say to the voters - "That's what you are getting. Come out on Thursday and reject this". There would not be an opportunity for us to counter his remarks in time. If the meeting has to be held it may have to be a question of saying nothing. Suggesting that they should say that the meeting was adjourned he reiterated that it was a very sensitive time.

9. On the issues of substance he stated that they do not have any problems with personalities but they do visualise problems if one person is responsible for both the decommissioning component of discussions and for Strand Two at the same time. He also pointed out that if, as he expected, there is a sluggishness on the decommissioning side there will be a similar go-slow on the agenda, venue and chairmanship issues. He believed that the parties will not get down to substantive issues until there is a decision on the modus operandi on the decommissioning issue.

The Taoiseach accepted his point and described it as a "Chicken and Egg" situation. Assurances will not be given on decommissioning until specifics have been agreed on the other issues. The way forward on this he believed was through "conversations in corridors" which might result in packages being put together that will complement one another. Agreements will be very much on a day-to-day basis.

10. Questioned by Close on what time-scale he envisaged, the Taoiseach replied that he would like it to be as short as possible. He thought that the time frame would be one ingredient in a mixture to be put together rather than pre-ordained. Close believed that there were two different views on the timeframe depending on the context i.e. arms context vs. political context. The Taoiseach stated that was why there has to be one Chairman. Taylor suggested that there might be progress on one track which would be held until the second track caught up. The Taoiseach agreed with this view and suggested that a tie-breaking mechanism might be required at certain points in the discussion.

11. Alderdice stated that their big concern hasn't been relieved by the peace process so far - what Sinn Féin's real expectations are. Have they really begun to accommodate themselves in reality he asked or are they living in 'Cloud Cuckoo' land? The Taoiseach referred to Gerry Adam's article in the Irish Times where he said that he would settle for significantly short of his ultimate objective. Close questioned whether this would occur in a situation where

arms were not given up. Donlon stated that Adams accepts that decommissioning will happen. Neeson asked would Adams' bottom line be the Joint Framework Document. The Taoiseach said that he believed they would settle 'within visibility' of the Framework Document.

12. Taylor referred back to his idea of two tracks and waiting for one of them to catch up. Alderdice pointed out that the political track is the one you can continue on the longest with the parties without commitment. But then Unionists will turn around and say that nothing has been achieved on decommissioning. The Taoiseach pointed out that there might be other benefits such as the actual behaviour of the IRA on the ground. Close stressed that this would not be enough - Canary Wharf had seen to that. People were seeking a demonstration of some decommissioning, an indication that this time the IRA are prepared to move forward.
13. Alderdice said that without some decommissioning Paisley, with an eye on the Westminster election campaign, would walk out of the talks. The Taoiseach said that if a ceasefire is reinstated, Sinn Féin subsequently take part in talks and they fail because Sinn Féin do not show adequate willingness this would be a disaster for their leadership. They cannot reinstate another ceasefire and start all over again. Therefore while initially it might appear as if Sinn Féin has all the cards, on further reflection they will see that if they drive the Unionists beyond a certain point it would be bad for

them. His problem with Sinn Féin was that during the ceasefire they did not show that they had internalised the logic of the ceasefire - they failed to re-educate their people. Close pointed out that if things were done with any semblance of political logic there wouldn't have been a bomb in Canary Wharf.

14. Alderdice stated that the reality of the situation is that this is a managed process. It is managed by the two Governments with the assistance of some people inside and some outside the process to encourage and to push people to some point where there is some agreement. He inquired if that was how the Taoiseach viewed it. The Taoiseach agreed but said that he wouldn't state that publicly. The process will be managed by the two Governments and the Chairman.
15. The Taoiseach referred to the major concern of Sinn Féin vis-à-vis the talks. He believed that they were worried in case something that they could not handle was sprung on them such as a timetable on decommissioning during talks. They were concerned that they would be brought into the talks to be humiliated and expelled, "to have their bad faith demonstrated to the world."
16. Donlon pointed out that the UUP manifesto did not use the word "Decommissioning" at all and he believed it was constructive on this point. Alderdice interpreted the absence of the word as reflecting a real desire on the part of the Unionists to engage and

not to contribute to the overheating of the election campaign. He thought it ill-advised to assume that the absence would mean that Trimble could cope with a situation where he had nothing to show for it in three months.

17. Alderdice referred to a problem they had encountered in the Forum whilst dealing with Sinn Féin. The Sinn Féin participants in the Forum he believed, had begun to appreciate the other parties' positions but they would then go to their Central Committee and return saying "No". He saw that the "people in the shadows" were not engaging in the whole process. His concern was that the same thing would occur in the talks. The Taoiseach replied that the psychology of threat was the psychology of the Republican movement. The problem was how to get them to learn a new method of interacting with other people.

18. Replying to a question from Bell as to why the IRA bombed Canary Wharf, Rabbitte suggested that a majority of hard men in the IRA decided that 17 months of a ceasefire had not led them to where they had thought it would. He believed they are now saying that they would not be walked into that again and so they will not call a ceasefire. They will say there is a de facto ceasefire in operation and they will believe they are in a perfectly defensible position. Referring to Sinn Féin's comments about the Mitchell principles, Close highlighted the fact that Adams had merely said that they would sign up to the principles during negotiations. This he said was not a substitute for a ceasefire. The Taoiseach

pointed out that the Sinn Féin statement concerning the Mitchell principles was contingent on a ceasefire and on their participation on talks.

19. Continuing, the Taoiseach pointed to the fact that the Mitchell principles say that decommissioning should be mutual. Alderdice stated that the reality is that the Unionists will put pressure on the Loyalists to decommission even in the absence of Sinn Féin from the talks. He believed that there is a big difference in the way that weapons are viewed in the Unionist and Nationalist communities. There is no sympathy in the Unionist community for the prisoners - "Prisoners will never be an issue in the Unionist community". The Taoiseach said that he had not realised that the Unionist community would not be concerned if Loyalists were disarming even if the IRA weren't. Kirwan pointed out that the mainstream Unionist community could rely on the security forces for protection and Alderdice agreed.

20. The meeting concluded with Alderdice emphasising once again the specific sensitivity regarding the IGC meeting.

B Nolan
24 May 1996

Attendance

Taoiseach

Mr. Mervyn Taylor

Mr. Pat Rabbitte

Mr. Sean Donlon, Special Adviser to the Taoiseach

Mr. Walter Kirwan, Department of the Taoiseach

Mr. Rory Montgomery, Department of Foreign Affairs

Ms. Bridgeena Nolan, Department of the Taoiseach

Dr. John Alderdice

Ms. Eileen Bell

Mr. Seamus Close

Mr. Sean Neeson

Mr. Steve McBride