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Reference Code: 2021/98/5

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SECRET

Telephone conversation between Taoiseach

and the British Prime Minister

Saturday 26 October 1996

PM Difficulty with phones!

T Hello John, Thank you very much for taking the call today I know its awkward here. I hope your not too pressed for time

PM I am just on my way out in a few minutes.

T I had a very good conversation yesterday with Paddy and also

PM Paddy told me you did nothing but drink huge pints of Irish whiskey

T Not quite, I gave him a very large one. I'd like just to say basically what my up to date knowledge of the situation is. Shortly after that there was a meeting between some of our officials and Sinn Féin, or with Adams basically, and the outcome of that was that Adams stated quite categorically that if the article - as almost agreed - was to be published that there would be, within 24 hours a ceasefire. He stated this very directly and very clearly and the people who met him (insofar as any one can believe what he says) believed that this is true. Thus, we are at a point where, we could, have an immediate restoration of the ceasefire. This I think is something that needs to be looked at very carefully because I think it will be difficult to get back to this point again, unless we take it on board when we have it. Now the situation is of course, that we have made it clear, both of us, that a ceasefire must be credible and not tactical and must hold in all circumstances. They know that that is the position that we have taken. On the other hand, we also agreed, after the IRA had resumed their ceasefire, that in accordance with the February 28 Communiqué, that Sinn Féin participation requires a restoration of the ceasefire of August 1994 and we didn't elaborate on that. We didn't say anything about periods of delay or anything like that. This is all we said, just a restoration of the ceasefire. Now of course,

there is added difficulty because of what has happened since then in Lisburn and elsewhere. The other point I would make to you is that we had lengthy briefing last night by one of my officials with Seamus Mallon - who I think you will agree is somebody who has been utterly fearless and forthright into his approach to the provos and shows no sympathy for them (whatever about others in his Party). He said, very clearly, that a three month timeframe or delay would have disastrous electoral consequences for the SDLP, insofar as if they stayed in the talks, and Sinn Fein were locked out, that Sinn Féin would attract all the sympathy of the nationalist community and that sympathy would serve them marvellously in the election, whenever the election happened, and nothing would suit Sinn Féin better than to be in the sin bin going into an election because they would be able to look for votes on the strength of "vote for us so that we will be let into the talks" scenario which has great appeal to an Irish electorate. You can imagine it. Mallon was very strong on that. His concern about the credibility of the IRA and Sinn Féin would be as strong, I think, as yours or mine. But that was his view. You might say then that we are looking at a situation which is one of two positions that are quite far apart. But there is one piece in the jigsaw that hasn't been looked at in any detail at all, and that is what the IRA would actually be saying in their statement. It is entirely possible that they would say, or might say a lot more of a reassuring kind than they have said before, about for example, their attitude to unionist right and the necessity for unionist agreement. They might come close to accepting the principle of consent (but not in those precise terms perhaps), and they might say things about what they would be doing during the ceasefire, and not doing during the ceasefire, which would be more explicit. But none of that has been pursued with them really as far as I can know. Adams did say yesterday when he met our officials, that he did agree that while he insisted that they wouldn't accept any kind of penitential period or any limbo or whatever when they would be sort of outside the talks but not in sackcloth and ashes. He accepted however that the scenario would have to be worked out in full about what might be said. Implicitly I think he accepted that wordings would have to be discussed, not just the wording of what you might say, but also the wordings of what they might say.

PM Two way streets.

T Yes. Now I don't want to over suggest the significance of this but in a situation that seems to be fairly bleak at one level in terms of the distance

of the parties from one another it did seem to offer one of the few hopeful avenues for further enquiry.

PM Well John, all that is extremely interesting. Its extremely difficult to know precisely how to respond, because all the evidence we get, is that the IRA are actually planting some more bombs and we have quite enough information to suggest that is the case. We don't really have any concrete evidence that Adams is serious or even if he is serious, that he would actually deliver even if he wished to. There might be that distinction. The other two problems that arise are, firstly, if they came into the talks would anybody else be there? If there wasn't a delay, would the unionists walk out? That is difficult because the Ulster Unionists are under great pressure from McCartney and Paisley, and they are also highly sensitive to the timeframe of the General Election. There's the added question whether, even if I were persuaded, I could actually persuade my colleagues that it was an option worth trying. Now I am due to see Hume on Tuesday. Hume has been very pressing with this, though of course there has been other occasions as you know when John Hume has been very pressing and when we produce something he has shifted the ground rules as indeed he has done twice, on the present series of exchanges. The problem I might add, is the sheer question of political reality, that if I were to acquiesce Sinn Féin coming into the talks without a delay, then I might not be able to carry colleagues in Government, let alone the backbenches, let alone the Unionists and I don't know the answer to that. Of course there are things as yet unexplored, and you touched on grounds that Paddy Mayhew and I have been looking at already and that was the question of precisely what would the IRA say, and in what terms would they say it? Because if we are contemplating laying a paper or providing an article, or making a speech, or whatever it turns out to be, then I think it would be reasonable to know what their response would be and the wording of their response.

T Yes.

PM What is very difficult - the timeframe is difficult - I mean the interaction with a British General Election is pretty unfortunate, as it adds to the sensitivity of each Party. I don't see any great point of bringing Sinn Fein in if we just push the Unionists down the other side. But I think we will have to do some more consideration of that.

T Yes. Could I sort of take those points in reverse order. First of all, the question of an interaction with a General Election. I said to Paddy yesterday that I think it would be worth thinking about the possibility of having some form of indicative calendar for the talks agreed between the two Governments. Something that we would use our best endeavours to stick to. Now the calendar I have in mind would be one that would ensure that each of the items of importance were addressed seriatim not that they'd necessarily be resolved, and I would be hoping that we might be able to agree a calendar that would run, shall we say, up to October/November of next year. In other words it would be a calendar of work that would go through likely General Election dates. Thereby

PM When is the General Election in Ireland?

T Well I suppose we will be thinking of an October scenario.

PM Yes.

T Although I don't rule out the possibility of an earlier move. But that's what I am working on as an assumption. I don't think our election is so important really, because the participants are not standing in our election they are all standing in yours.

PM That's true.

T Therefore, we have got to have a programme of work that is stretching past the date of your election, which hopefully, in general terms, your opposition would also say well "that's a reasonable timetable".

PM I don't honestly think there will be any real difficulty

T Well I think the advantage

PM from the opposition anyway.

T Yes, the advantage of that would be, that it would, satisfy everybody if the thing wasn't going to be concluded before the election, it would satisfy people equally that because there was a timeframe of some kind that the thing wasn't going to be blocked until the election either and that holding out for the result of the election wouldn't suffice, because the others would have been tied into the timeframe which involved work

before and after the election date. That's just a thought for that. I also thought further about the difficulty that exists in regard to your view that there has to be some delay and Sinn Féin's very strong view - and I have to stress this, from the meeting yesterday - that any delay or quarantine period is just completely unacceptable to them in principle. Because they were told in the February 28 Communiqué that the condition was a restoration of the ceasefire, full stop.

PM I seem to remember one or two incidents since then.

T Indeed

PM Bombs in London, bombs in England, I can't imagine that is going to have no effect.

T Well, the truth is, that if one looks at your legislation it refers to no timeframe, no quarantine, it simply refers (in paragraph 8 and paragraph 9 of the ground rules) that they would show that there was an unequivocal commitment to peaceful methods, and that there was a ceasefire that's all. It doesn't refer to a timeframe, and I think that they would say that you were breaking the spirit of the legislation by introducing this third element of a timeframe. Now I am not trying to argue the point with you, but I think that the difficulty does arise that the ground rules and the legislation don't contain any reference to a three month, or a two month, or a ten month quarantine.

PM The timeframe is a way of making sure that it was actually genuine.

T Well that's one method

PM I don't think we'd have any difficulty with the House of Commons over that. The three months we've suggested was difficult to get any of my colleagues to agree to it and they eventually did it but reluctantly, and would be even more difficult the Unionists are thinking of a much longer timescale, as you probably know.

T Yes. Well I believe that any period of quarantine, on the basis of what I have been told, by people who met Sinn Fein, that a quarantine will mean no ceasefire.

PM Why should we believe them - I don't mean your colleagues John, I'm talking about Sinn Féin. What reasonable evidence is there to believe that we can accept a single word they say on the basis of what they have said and done in the past two years. They have misled not only you, but me, and everybody else. They have misled Clinton, everybody's been misled. They have lied whenever it was appropriate. During the period they were talking about peace they were actually hiring the garage in which we found the ten tonnes of explosives. At the very moment within a fortnight of them wandering up after their ceasefire and declaring that peace was agreed.

T On the other hand, it is fair to say, that when we drew up ground rules and the legislation, they were already back engaged in violence, and there was no ceasefire, and we didn't put in a quarantine three months at that stage, and they will claim that the introduction of a three month quarantine now, or a two month quarantine now, represents this classic new pre-condition imposed by the British.

PM Yes I know. That is what they will say, but the reality is, circumstances do change if you let off bombs. The second reality is whether we would be letting them in the talks at the expense of other people. They know very well what we have said over the last few weeks about there needing to be time and people needing to be sure that the ceasefire is secure.

T Well let me come to that point now; which is, what would happen with the Unionists. The truth of the matter is, that as I understand it, if the Unionists leave, the talks can't do anymore work, or they can't take any decisions. The procedure of the talks is say, that any decision has to be supported by a sufficient consensus, which is defined as a clear majority of the valid poll in both Nationalist and Unionists communities. So you need both communities, and if the Unionists aren't there, the talks can't actually go any further, really. So in a sense, one could argue that you don't need to impose a time frame, because the Unionists probably, if they want to, can impose a time frame themselves - by simply not taking part, and it is possible that one could see a situation where they might decide that they wanted to take longer to look at this than the Government's believed was prudent, and that the Governments would say that we understand that you need to take some more time, and that there would be a marking time process but not imposed by the British Government which is a very allergic concern from the point of view of Sinn Féin but something that the Unionists had decided that they wanted

to do in exercise of the prerogatives that the ground rules for the talks have actually given to them. So it may be possible to achieve the same results that your colleagues want but have it achieved through the instrument of some of the participants in the talks exercising their prerogatives in an orderly way, rather than by your imposing it, as the British Government which has all of the negative connotations from the point of view of the hardline republican attitude of mind. I'll just leave that as a thought with you, I don't

PM The politics of that are pretty unattractive aren't they? Because the first thing I would be asked is - do I agree with the Unionists? Shouldn't I be telling the Unionists to come to the table if I am prepared to let Sinn Féin rest, in fact, what I would be doing is effectively be passing the decision, the decision frankly that I agree with, off on to somebody else's shoulders and moreover doing that at a pretty sensitive time in terms of the UK paper.

T Well I think there are ways of doing it that wouldn't have that effect.

PM I would be happy to examine that I have, I certainly would love to hear what Hume has to say, and I certainly think we need to know what they would say in due course before we can progress this.

T. There was one other point that you mentioned in your very precise response to my viewpoint, you said that it wasn't clear that Adams can deliver.

PM That's correct

T My feeling is that he can, and will, and I believe he will deliver a ceasefire.

PM Does he have any evidence for that.

T No, other than, well yes I have had reports from our services which suggest that group if you like are in a more confident mode in the organisation since August or so, and they are being given the chance to do the job now. Now I have to say that what I believe he can deliver is a ceasefire, it may well be a tactical ceasefire, but not be one that in the deeper recesses of our hearts we can say we really believe that it is going to hold in all circumstances. But I think he can deliver a ceasefire just

the same, and I think it is also the case that that ceasefire lasts, that it's going to be hard for them to go back - or at least they won't be able to play that game again. So I do think he can deliver a ceasefire, and I think a ceasefire would also stop the bombs that are perhaps almost ready to be primed at this moment.

PM That is a fear that I have apart from the fact that I am disinclined to believe almost everything that we get from him without concrete evidence. The other practical concern that we have is twofold. Firstly I don't think that the timeframe is a new hurdle. I think it is a translation into reality of what we have said about an unequivocal ceasefire. But Adams and I could argue about that forever. The other point is this, if there are reasonably clear terms for a post ceasefire entry for Sinn Féin, that's not spelt out clearly in a way that is generally acceptable, I don't see very much chance of persuading the Ulster Unionists to set decommissioning aside and move to the substance. So that then there would be no talks for Sinn Féin to join, and the danger, off the back of that, is that we might lose the Loyalists ceasefire as well, which is in itself a pretty fragile thing these days.

T Could you explain that to me now?

PM That we are being too generous to Sinn Féin without clear indication that this is genuine. I am not at all sure they hold the line at the other side of the fence. I would want to do quite a lot of varying and considering and talking and examining before I was a bit more reassured on that. I don't know where they would go, or what they would do, which is no help to us, or you, or anybody else, if the Loyalists ceasefire goes, particularly if it goes your side of the border.

T No, indeed.

PM And I am extremely concerned about that. I think the best thing I can do is, I'll need to talk to other colleagues more about this. We'll need to consider what options exist, though we have made it pretty clear publicly, and in the House of Commons, in response to the opposition, that we see some time frame to make sure that there is a reality about the ceasefire. Now I suppose if something was there to replace the time frame by way of concrete change in what was said, or what was done, then circumstances might change.

T Yes, I think that the imposition of a time frame of three months, or two months, would be seen as a new pre-condition, I think the terms of the ground rules refer

PM This isn't real, is it really John, I mean here these characters killing them and they expect to go straight into the talks.

T I completely sympathise with that, the truth is we will know in three months, I mean these are people who have had violence for 25 years they can stop it for 3 months if they wanted to, but it doesn't really mean that you are any surer, 3 months from now, of their intentions than you are

PM One very real draw back as it happens, what actually will be said, and believed, both by the Unionists and the House of Commons, that whenever Sinn Féin get irritable they can let off a bomb or two and the moment they promise to stop letting off bombs in future we rush them straight into the talks as though nothing had happened. Well I don't think you'd keep the Unionists there in the real world. I don't think they'd stay, they'd just say this is a craven attitude on the part of the British Government. These people have offered us nothing concrete, they have just been murdering people, they've now said again they've stopped. They said that before. They broke their word yet again. The gullible British Government have rushed them straight into talks, well thank you very much indeed, the Unionists would say "we're not having anything to do with that. Paisley won't, McCartney won't, and we the Ulster Unionists are not going to be caught in that cross fire, thank you very much". I think that's a real risk, its not a fantasy, it's more a probability than a possibility.

T Well what would the Unionists do in those circumstances, what would they do?

PM I think they would decline to join the talks for a period of time, minimum.

T And we'd have a ceasefire in the meantime?

PM We might have all sorts of other things in the House of Commons - not an attractive proposition.

T I'm not too sure, I think the fact that there would be a ceasefire and the violence would stop, would actually change the atmosphere, considerably particularly if is phrased in a way that is reassuring.

PM You see what the Unionists will say, I am not just trying to put obstacles in the way. I would like to get Sinn Féin into the talks as much as you would because that is the route down in which we eventually wish to go, but I think I know what the Unionists would say

At this point the tape ran out, I therefore have appended the relevant text from Mr. Kirwan's account of the proceedings to cover the remainder of the conversation - it should be borne in mind that what is noted below is neither verbatim, nor exhaustive.

Prime Minister

I shall meet Hume and listen to him and test reactions in various quarters.

Taoiseach

Could I suggest that our officials might meet on Monday, to consider further material that could be placed before us, including the question of a calendar.

Prime Minister

I would be concerned if it were to leak back from any such meeting to colleagues of mine that we were talking about, or apparently considering any variation from the three months timeframe decided on. I shall be seeing Hume on Tuesday and we can consider, after that, how we can proceed.

Taoiseach

I understand your concern. Perhaps, then it is better if Paddy Teahon talks to John Holmes.

Prime Minister

Yes, that would be better.

Taoiseach

Thank you for interrupting your weekend to take this call.

Prime Minister

Not at all. I was glad to talk.

The conversation finished at this point having taken almost exactly 30 minutes. When it was over, the Taoiseach indicated that he envisaged Secretary Teahon flying over to London to see Mr John Holmes.

The assessment of the Taoiseach and of the Attorney General was that it would be very difficult to move the British from the idea of a quarantine period but that it may be possible to secure some movement from the three-months timeframe specified.