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Reference Code: 2021/99/13

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Meeting between Officials and representatives of Sinn Féin

20th May, 1997

Present were:

Official side: Mr. P. Teahon, Mr. T. Dalton, Mr. S. O hUiginn

Sinn Fein side: Mr. Gerry Adams, Mr. Martin McGuinness, Mr. Aidan McAteer, Ms. Rita O'Hare.

(Note: The meeting, which lasted about two and a half hours, at times went over the same ground as the previous meeting. These exchanges have not been reported in any detail.)

1. After initial exchanges in which Mr. Teahon set out the terms of reference of the meeting and stressed the fundamental concerns of the Taoiseach and Government, Mr. Adams summarised the Sinn Féin approach to the meeting with British officials: They did not want to become bogged down in an exchange of papers, since they believed that was a factor in the lack of real engagement on previous occasions. Both he, and Mr. McGuinness subsequently, expressed grave reservations about the role of officials in sponsoring what they believed was a militaristic strategy aimed at splitting the Republican movement. Unless there was a different policy now, the project would fail.
2. Mr. Adams said they proposed to handle the meeting with the British in a relatively open way to test whether the latter had, in fact, a new approach.

Hé deplored the fact that Sinn Féin were not interacting with the politicians, who might prove more perceptive to the new mood on the ground in the nationalist community in Northern Ireland.

3. Mr. Teahon recalled that the British had also complained about a lack of engagement in the past by the Sinn Féin representatives. We had taken some encouragement from the contacts we had had with British officials. He stressed the depth of mistrust which had to be overcome, and urged strongly that the meeting should not drift into mutual recrimination. He endorsed the idea of keeping the discussions reasonably flexible, without the straight-jacket of text.
4. Mr. O hUiginn and Mr. Dalton stressed that the past difficulties which Sinn Féin had felt in their dealings with British civil servants might also reflect the political instructions under which the civil servants worked. We had the impression in the past that some of them had private reservations about the wisdom of those instructions. With different instructions, they might be more forthcoming, and it was not inevitable that they would have a negative approach, or want to hamper understanding. We had grounds for hope to the contrary, although of course Sinn Féin could have to “check against delivery”.
5. The Official side endorsed the point made at the previous meeting by Sinn Féin that if the forthcoming engagement did not make matters better, it would very probably make them worse. It was very important therefore that Sinn Féin should give a strong and unmistakable signal of real engagement, of commitment to a ceasefire and of urgency about its restoration when they met with British officials. We hoped British officials would respond in kind. If

both sides demonstrated the capacity and will to bring about the conditions for a ceasefire, the means would surely be found to make it a reality.

6. Mr. Adams said they had not ruled out deploying a text, and referred to his forthcoming article (which appeared in Wednesday's *Irish Times*). In response to officials' points about the depth of distrust directed at Sinn Féin which had to be overcome, Mr. McGuinness criticised at length the militaristic mindset he believed British officials had brought to their task, contrasting it with the South African experience. Mr. Ralph Meyer had said that the transition from militaristic to political thinking had been a defining moment in that process. Mr. Adams recalled the huge bombs placed outside the Sinn Féin offices, and the insensitivity of British Ministers in meeting and praising loyalists at the time of Sean Browne's murder.

7. Mr. O hUiginn suggested a discussion of the four points flagged by Sinn Féin. He felt that their putting confidence issues at the top could be helpful, as we hoped that the implementation of Labour policy would, of itself, bring some improvements in this area. He listed some of these. Mr. Adams said they had not a precise shopping list. Many items were around since the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985. They should be done anyway. They were particularly important at present, when so many things were happening that were positively undermining confidence. Some aspects, such as the equality agenda, etc., should be championed by the Irish Government on the merits and irrespective of context. They should not be dropped if unionists protested. Other aspects belonged to a more "cessation-type" situation, e.g. release of prisoners.

8. A discussion followed on the decommissioning issue. Mr. O hUiginn summarised the approach of the Irish Government, centred in essence on the

implementation of all aspects of the Mitchell Report. Mr. McGuinness said the decommissioning issue would be a fundamental litmus-test of a new approach. The British Government had to “cross the Rubicon” of treating the conflict as a *political*, not a security problem. In response to questions by Mr. Teahon, Mr. McGuinness objected that the British Government had their own interpretation of the Mitchell Report. Mitchell himself was sensible, and saw the key to the question as moving onto substantive negotiations.

9. A discussion followed on the question of decommissioning during negotiations. Officials said the British Government interpreted the report as requiring actual decommissioning during negotiations. It would be unrealistic to expect them to abandon that interpretation. The alternative interpretation of the Mitchell Report, whereby all participants entered in good faith into a consideration of the issue, with parallel decommissioning as the goal or aspiration, was also legitimate. The key was to use the report and begin discussions in good faith, without making commitment to either interpretation a prior doctrinal test or precondition.
10. Mr. Adams said that decommissioning was a road-block on two levels - to get into the negotiating process and, secondly, within the negotiating process. The Sinn Féin side invoked the South African experience. Mr. Adams recalled that when he was with Nelson Mandela, the latter had given a diplomatically evasive answer to a question on decommissioning, but had added the pointed aside “by the way, we never decommissioned”. Mr. McGuinness recounted an anecdote of a Lough Neagh fisherman (of the SDLP persuasion) intercepted by a British patrol boat whose captain allegedly opined that there was no precedent for prior decommissioning, and that the IRA should be advised not to do it. Mr. Adams said the crux of the matter was whether this issue continued as a tactical blocking mechanism or not.

11. Mr. Teahon stressed again the importance of overcoming distrust and using the forthcoming meetings with British officials to build confidence. They must avoid repeating the chicken and egg dilemma. The idea of certainty and predictability in the negotiating process was a delusion. The negotiations would inevitably have their own, and at times unpredictable, dynamic. Sinn Féin should be prepared to work out a reasonable position and defend it.
12. Mr. Adams said it boiled down to whether there were going to be real talks or not. De Klerk had been sensible. It remained to see whether the British Government would be. Sinn Féin worried that, on this or other matters, Dublin was simply adopting an Irish version of the British position.
13. Mr. Dalton stressed again the importance of using the meeting with the British to seek a meeting of minds on the four points, the Sinn Féin position on which had been set out clearly in the most recent text.
14. On timing of Sinn Féin entry, Mr. O hUiginn said that it was doubtful whether a lapse of some weeks could give the British any certainty on the future intentions of the IRA. However it was also difficult to accept that, in the perspective of history, a delay of a few weeks was fatal on the Republican side. It was really a symbolic and presentational issue, rather than a deep difficulty of substance or timing, as such. Both sides should concentrate on solving the symbolic and presentational aspects in their negotiations, and use lateral thinking to find an approach which met everyone's concern.
15. Mr. Adams repeated the strong line he had taken on immediate Sinn Féin entry at the previous meeting. The best construction that could be put on any delay was probation, the worst decontamination. He complained that each time there was a development in nationalist politics which the British did not

like, they flagrantly changed the rules, most recently throwing out "Erskine May" to keep the Sinn Féin M.P.s out of Parliament. He urged the logic and importance of British Ministers accepting meetings and representations from Sinn Féin M.P.s on constituency matters such as hospitals, etc. He would have this facility as a Councillor, and it was absurd that he could not have it as an elected M.P. (There seemed to be some implication that this would be helpful in terms of the wider issue of Sinn Féin participation in talks.)

16. Mr. Dalton suggested that Sinn Féin, while making clear that the "sin bin" treatment was not on, should signal that they genuinely wanted to do business and invite British views as to how this might be done. Mr. Adams agreed that it would be helpful to take that approach.
17. Mr. Teahon and Mr. O hUiginn stressed the practical difficulties which Labour would have with an immediate entry. They could theoretically bulldoze it through, but they would have regard to the unionist reaction in those circumstances. If the unionists sought to walk out, it would be important not to give them grounds which their public might strongly support. A suggestion of a drastic change from the previous Government might be in that category. There was an objective reason to help the Labour Government.
18. Mr. Adams countered by quoting anecdotally the pride of Alex Maskey's mother after his election in City Hall. The nationalist community had to feel confidence and pride. If that was not supplied politically, they fell back on the IRA. If the political project could move forward, the nationalist community could move forward without the IRA. The British establishment had a fixed mindset towards Ireland. To counter that needed a strong

position by the Irish Government, above and beyond a merely pragmatic approach to negotiations. He again urged a strong speech by the Taoiseach to counter the premises in the Blair speech.

19. Officials drew attention to the sensitivity and difficulty of the electoral context in that respect. They stressed again the particular importance of ensuring that Sinn Féin kept the present enterprise free from any electoral agenda.

20. Mr. Teahon said that a key part of the Republican movement begin convincing on the unequivocal nature of a ceasefire were the terms in which it would be declared and Sinn Féin's acceptance of and clear adherence to the Mitchell principles. Mr. Adams pointed to the change between Sinn Féin's statement on the previous Friday and the statement from him reported in the *Irish News* of Tuesday. Essentially Sinn Féin were now stating that they were satisfied that an IRA ceasefire "will be genuinely unequivocal containing a clear and unambiguous commitment to enhance a genuine peace process". In relation to the Mitchell principles, Mr. Adams said that Sinn Féin would accept and adhere to all these principles and that again this was stated clearly in the *Irish News* article he had referred to.

21. Mr. Teahon drew attention to the points contained in the Taoiseach's *Irish Times* interview that day. A contact was also envisaged between the Taoiseach and Mr. Blair in the margin of the European Summit. It was possible also, subject to electoral timetable, that the Tánaiste and the Secretary of State would meet before the resumption of the Talks. These opportunities would be used to convey strongly the position of the Irish Government.

22. Mr. Adams, whether genuinely or for tactical purposes, conveyed disappointment that officials had not produced more specific commitments in terms of the likely British position.

23. Officials made clear that we did not purport to “deliver” the British Government to the Republican movement or vice versa. We had a sober awareness of the limited number of occasions our advice was followed by either group. There were, however, unfounded margins of suspicions on both sides, and we were doing our best to eliminate these, wherever we identified them.

24. The meeting concluded with a commitment by Mr. Adams that they would get us a report of the meeting on their side. On press presentation, it was agreed that every effort would be made to avoid drawing public attention to the meeting, and if that nonetheless happened, the line of not commenting on individual meetings would be observed.

Sean Ó hUiginn

21 May 1997