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485/1

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21 May 1997

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To: HQ
For: Second Secretary O'Uiginn

From: Belfast
From: Joint Secretary

Subj: British Government meeting with Sinn Féin

1. I have obtained the following read-out on today's meeting between British Government officials and a Sinn Féin delegation from Peter Bell, who had been briefed by Jonathan Stephens and Quentin Thomas.
2. The meeting, which took place at Stormont Castle, lasted from 12 noon until 3 pm, with a half-hour break for lunch. Sinn Féin were represented by Martin McGuinness, Gerry Kelly, Caoimhin Ó Caolain and Siobhan O Hanlon. The British side consisted of Quentin Thomas, Jonathan Stephens and Chris McCabe.
3. The atmosphere was very good and the British officials considered it to have been a productive meeting. While there was not much give-and-take across the table, positive signals were delivered nevertheless by both sides and it was agreed that there should be a further meeting next week.
4. Sinn Féin made a more formal opening presentation than the British side. They emphasised their desire to do serious business and accepted that they shared the responsibility for resolving conflict in Ireland. They were determined to achieve peace and wished to become involved in inclusive talks. Overall, the British side found the presentation very positive.

485/2

2

5. Thomas responded by making clear that events on the ground would be of critical importance in determining whether the dialogue now opened could continue. He emphasised, however, the profound commitment of the new British Government to bringing Sinn Féin into the process.
6. Discussion then turned to the four key issues for Sinn Féin.

As regards a date for entry, the British side told Sinn Féin that the new Government might be prepared to take a different line on the question of whether or not the ceasefire was genuine than its predecessor had done. The Secretary of State would make a political judgement of this matter in the light of all the circumstances. When Martin McGuinness sought clarification, contrasting the envisaged "political judgement" with the previous Government's planned reliance on intelligence assessments etc, Thomas said that the latter would be taken into account but reiterated that the new Government would form a political judgement "in the round" based on all the evidence available to it.

As regards confidence building measures, Thomas asked whether Sinn Féin were seeking a programme of specific actions or mere verbal assurances. Sinn Féin gave a somewhat uncertain response which suggested to the British side they had not thought through this issue fully. They highlighted the importance of action in relation to prisoners but made clear that they were not seeking a general amnesty. The British side drew their attention to the confidence-building elements in the Queen's Speech.

On decommissioning, the British side left Sinn Féin in no doubt about the critical importance of this issue. If the talks were to get anywhere, "this nut would have to be cracked" on the basis of sufficient consensus. Thomas made clear that the Mitchell Report was the sacred text for the two Governments in this respect. Asked about Unionist intentions, he said that the British Government did not know how Trimble would play his hand when the talks resumed. He emphasised, however, the cooperation underway with the Irish Government to find a solution to the present impasse and the determination of both Government to make progress into the three-stranded negotiations as soon as possible.

As regards a time frame, Thomas asked Sinn Féin for confirmation that their main

485/3

concern was to avoid a situation in which the talks became bogged down indefinitely. McGuinness provided this confirmation. Thomas recalled that May 1998 featured in the legislation as the expiry date for the Forum and that the Unionists had indicated that they would not negotiate without a Forum. He hinted that May 1998 might be seen as an indicative time-frame for completion of the negotiations and promised that the British Government would do all in its power to make progress within that period. Even if it did not prove possible to make progress by next May, the British Government would remain committed to the process as such.

"project" John

- 7. It was agreed that another meeting next week would be desirable, though no date or venue were fixed.
- 8. As regards publicity, it was agreed that neither side would issue a statement. Doorstepped within the last hour, the Secretary of State has said that she understood the meeting to have been a useful one, that various important matters had been explored and that there had been an agreement in principle to meet again. We understand that Sinn Féin have also commented informally to the same effect, though at greater length and with some polemical regret about the length of time it had taken Sinn Féin to reach this point in its dealings with British Governments.