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AMBASAID NA hÉIREANN, LONDAIN



IRISH EMBASSY, LONDON

5 September 1997

Mr Dermot Gallagher
Second Secretary
Anglo-Irish Division
Department of Foreign Affairs

Dear Secretary

Meeting with SDLP Group

The Ambassador, accompanied by Mr McDonagh, Ms Blake and myself, had a two-hour meeting at the Embassy yesterday evening with an SDLP group comprising Denis Haughey, Mark & Jackie Durkan, Alex Attwood, Joe Byrne, Tim Attwood and Conal McDevitt. They had spent the day with British Labour Party officials, studying aspects of that party's organisational and communications management, and were most impressed by the youthfulness, drive, and lack of complacency of the Labour machine.

Organisational Matters

The group briefed us on their plans, which are still preliminary, to enhance the SDLP profile in London. Among the ideas being considered are the appointment of a full-time Westminster-based assistant to the three MPs, who would also act as a point of contact for media and general queries; the holding of fund-raising events, aimed in particular at the Irish business community; and the dissemination of information to a wider circle of interested people, as is done by the Unionist Information Office here. We offered views and advice on these possibilities, and assured them that as their thinking developed the Embassy would provide whatever assistance was required.

The Talks

We had a wide-ranging discussion of the prospects for the talks, both short and longer-term. In relation to the unionists, the SDLP group were firmly of the view that David Trimble's thinking was heavily tactical and short-term, and that he now found himself in a very difficult position. The near-impossibility of knowing at any point just what his real bottom line is was emphasised.

Mark Durkan suggested that, from a unionist viewpoint, there were merits both in staying away from next Tuesday's plenary and in being present. Under the former scenario, the leadership would not have tainted itself by engagement with Sinn Féin, in particular before the meeting of the Executive Committee. On the other hand, it would have passed up the possibility of publicly pressing Sinn Féin to explain the implications of the Mitchell principles for its positions on decommissioning and on consent. Durkan (who seemed to be drawing from conversations with Jeffrey Donaldson) thought it possible that the UUP might suggest that a group of Northern

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Ireland-based "experts" take a fresh look at decommissioning - as part of the still incomplete initial address to the topic required of the negotiations - and that in the interim they would confine themselves to informal substantive discussions, in bilateral or multilateral mode. It was interesting that Durkan himself seemed to think that the Mitchell report might need to be revisited and fleshed out in the light of current circumstances.

More generally, the group were well aware of, and resigned to, the fact that the UUP can garner a substantial measure of credit, especially in Britain, simply by not walking away from the process altogether, even if there may be little forward movement.

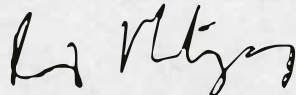
As regards Sinn Féin, what was most striking was the group's deep wariness and pessimism about the seriousness of that party's commitment to exclusively peaceful means. Sinn Féin's willingness to play a long game, and their tactical flexibility, were both emphasised. Alex Attwood was the gloomiest, seeing a breakdown of the ceasefire as by no means unlikely if there is not fairly rapid movement forward in substantive talks - which he felt could not be guaranteed. Durkan was more inclined to see Sinn Féin as being quite relaxed about an eventual breakdown of talks, particularly if the blame could be easily pinned on the British or the unionists, depending on the audience. He underscored the difficult position in which the SDLP could find itself as "pig-in-the-middle" between the UUP and Sinn Féin, above all if the talks are in bilateral mode: blamed by the former for not conceding enough and by the latter for conceding too much.

Denis Haughey felt that Sinn Féin, after a very quiet spell, would gradually try to push out the boundaries of what was tolerable, encouraging street politics and vigilante activity, as methods both of restoring social control and of giving republican activists something to do. He thought, however, that the "sinews of war" had been seriously weakened by the first ceasefire. The least pessimistic was Joe Byrne, who thought that Sinn Féin would be loth to risk their new-found credibility with the US administration, the British and Irish Governments, and with public opinion everywhere (Alex Attwood offered the contrary view that the approbation of the Americans counted for increasingly less, at least in the eyes of the hardliners.) We suggested that the general political situation, including the fact of newly-elected governments in both Britain and Ireland which had been prepared to take risks to bring Sinn Féin on board, surely made it harder to envisage how the blame for a breakdown could be plausibly placed elsewhere than on the republican movement itself.

At the end of our conversation, Mark Durkan said that, more than ever, it was now up to the parties themselves to turn "confidence-building" into a reality: there were limits to how meaningful assurances from the Governments or the Chairmen could be.

In conclusion, the SDLP group expressed their appreciation of the Embassy's willingness to offer assistance in their efforts to build up their London organisation, and of the discussion we had had on political matters.

Yours sincerely



Rory Montgomery
First Secretary