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Meeting between Taoiseach and Secretary of State for Northern Ireland

Government Buildings, 23 September 1998

Summary Note

1. The Taoiseach was accompanied by Sec Gen Teahon, Dr Mansergh and, in the absence of the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Sec Gallagher in New York, the Joint Secretary and T O'Connor from the Department of Foreign Affairs. Dr Mowlam was accompanied by Mr J Stephens, Mr P Bell and Mr N Perry. This note summarises the main points to arise.

Decommissioning/Shadow Executive - Recent Contacts

2. The Taoiseach provided an outline of recent meetings and telephone conversations he had had. In a long telephone call with Seamus Mallon, the latter had conveyed deep frustration with the current impasse. He felt that forward movement was urgently required. He was opposed to a meeting of the Shadow North/South Council before the formation of the Shadow Executive, a view the Taoiseach shared. In contacts with Gerry Adams, the latter said that he had made the two big moves asked of him and there was "no more he could do" at this point. The Taoiseach had asked him when might decommissioning start. Mr Adams had agreed that it "is a fair question for you to ask, but I cannot give you an answer".
3. Turning to his meeting the previous evening with David Trimble, the Taoiseach said that Mr Trimble had made clear to him that his room to manoeuvre was very limited. He needed "something". He understood the argument about the text of the Agreement (not explicitly linking decommissioning to formation of the Shadow Executive), but it could equally be argued that such linkage was not ruled out. In any case, he was now stuck with the realities of the position in which he found himself. The Taoiseach commented to Dr Mowlam that there was no doubting the scale of Mr Trimble's political difficulties - as exemplified by the fact that there were parts of his constituency, previously strongholds of his, which he could now only visit with the protection of the RUC.

4. The Taoiseach said that Mr Trimble saw little scope in a distinction between the Shadow and the full Executive. Mr Trimble was conscious, however, of the reality that if movement could not be achieved by mid-November, when the Northern Ireland Bill was due to have completed all stages, "things could get dangerous". When asked by the Taoiseach whether some form of timetable on decommissioning would be sufficient, Mr Trimble suggested he would need "something small", perhaps in addition to progress on the Disappeared. The Taoiseach noted, however, that Mr Trimble made clear that if he got that "something", he could move immediately on the formation of the Executive. The Taoiseach commented to Dr Mowlam that in the past when he had asked the same question, the answer was couched in additional qualifications.
5. On North/South, the Taoiseach said that he made clear to Mr Trimble that it would not be possible for the Government to move to a first formal meeting of the Shadow North/South Ministerial Council in advance of the formation of the Shadow Executive.
6. Dr Mowlam expressed sympathy for the difficulties and frustrations being encountered by Seamus Mallon. She wondered if it would help his position if the North/South Secretariat were to be located in Armagh. She said that the Courthouse building was vacant at present and she felt that it would be suitable for the Secretariat. The Taoiseach agreed that this was an option worth exploring.

Possible Steps

7. A major part of the discussion was devoted to the possible practical steps which could be taken to resolve the current stand-off on the Shadow Executive and decommissioning. Both the Taoiseach and Dr Mowlam agreed on the need for urgent action, "before the hole gets bigger". Given the assertion of both main players that they had no room to manoeuvre, progress would not be easily achieved. It was agreed that while there was a case for halting all activity and putting the exclusive focus on resolving the current impasse, the balance of advantage lay with pressing on with work on as wide a number of fronts as possible, while addressing privately the decommissioning issue. The sole public focus should not be allowed to rest on decommissioning. Dr Mowlam agreed with the Taoiseach's view that a joint strategy by the two Governments was also essential.
8. On decommissioning, a number of elements of a possible "package" were explored. These included movement on the disappeared (Dr Mansergh briefed on ongoing efforts regarding the return of the body of an INLA activist killed in Paris), accelerated progress towards normalisation, a role for General de Chastelain and movement on modalities and timing. Secretary General Teahon

cautioned on the difficulties surrounding timescales and pointed to the disproportionality between entry into the Shadow Executive and decommissioning from Sinn Féin's perspective. The British side agreed that timescales would be difficult, but that it would be helpful if one could say that a process has begun which would be ongoing. Dr Mansergh suggested that progress on punishment beatings would also be helpful.

9. Dr Mowlam referred to next week's Labour Party Conference, which meant that Mr. Blair would not be able to focus fully on the issue until after that.
10. There was an exchange on how progress on North/South matters could be made in the current circumstances. The possibility of technical preparations, at both political and official levels, was explored. Both sides agreed on the need to advance preparation for the North/South Council as expeditiously as possible.
11. It was agreed that, immediately following the meeting, officials from both sides would work further on possible elements of an overall joint strategy for taking forward implementation of the Agreement in the current circumstances.

Other issues

12. There was a brief exchange on the state of play on the Northern Ireland Bill. Dr Mowlam flagged a potential difficulty ahead in regard to the Budget, hinting that a Spending Review which was due to be completed shortly by the British Government would bring "disappointment" for the Northern parties. The Taoiseach raised the question of the Newry-Dundalk road, and its continuing poor state at a time when the remainder of the route from Belfast to Rosslare was in much better condition. Dr Mowlam undertook to take the matter up with the NI Department of the Environment and with EU Commissioner Kinnock (including the possibility of a visit by the latter to the area).
13. Dr Mowlam spoke warmly of the meeting of the British-Irish Interparliamentary Body which she had just attended in York. She noted that after an initial exchange on the current political situation, most of the day was devoted to "routine" matters, such as Agriculture, Education etc. She found this very heartening. The Taoiseach said that he had mentioned the Body to David Trimble at their meeting. The latter had agreed that we were in a new situation and that the Interparliamentary dimensions of the new institutions would also have to be developed.

T O'Connor
Anglo-Irish Division
25 September 1998