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Meeting between the Taoiseach and PM Blair in Belfast on Sunday 16 August

1. The Taoiseach and Prime Minister Blair met for about 50 minutes in Stormont House in Belfast on Sunday evening 16 August to discuss the way forward on the security and political fronts in the aftermath of the Omagh bombing.
2. The PM was accompanied by Minister John McFall as well as Bill Jeffrey, John Semple, David Watkins, Stephen Leach, Tom Kelly, Philip Barton (PS to Minister McFall) and Paul Dollaghan (PS to Minister McFall).
3. In addition to the Taoiseach and Minister of State Liz O' Donnell, Paddy Teahon, Martin Mansergh and the undersigned were present on our side.
4. The discussions, in summary, covered (i) the measures to be taken on the security front against the dissidents following the Omagh bombing and (ii) political action needed in relation to the Good Friday Agreement.



As regards (i), it was agreed that the two Governments would do whatever was needed in the light of any specific measures the Chief Constable and the Garda Commissioner might put forward at their meeting the following day, 17 August.

As regards (ii), there was agreement on the the need for the two Governments, in very quick time, to work respectively on Adams and Trimble in regard to the former coming up with a formulation of words acceptable to Trimble, which would have the effect (in this regard, the presentation and subsequent explanation would be very important) of people understanding that the war was over. There was need to signal that Omagh and previous atrocities were firmly in the past and to show greater 'clarity of distinction' in relation to the dissidents. There would be need for clear understanding between the two sides that if Adams said certain things, Trimble in turn would respond in a certain way.

Detail

Action on the Security front

5. Opening the discussions, the Taoiseach suggested as regards the Omagh bombing that we were looking one hundred per cent at McKeivitt and Sands and the 32 County Sovereignty Movement and the 'real' IRA Referring to the meeting to take place the following day (17 August) between the Garda Commissioner and the Chief Constable, he described the various successes which had been achieved, on our side, against the dissidents and the different actions, including through the Courts, taken against them.
6. The dissidents were a dangerous and ruthless group, with some support from former members of the Provisional IRA technical/engineering unit. We were accordingly dealing with people who had the know-how/technology and the capability to commit atrocities. On the security front, there was full cooperation between the Gardai and the RUC and the two Governments. The security actions to be taken by the latter would depend on the advice from the former. Beyond the security dimension, he and the Prime Minister had in addition to provide people with the necessary confidence and

trust.

7. The **Prime Minister** said he agreed with that analysis. The first issue was to see what real security measures could be taken (the second issue to be addressed - see below - was action on the political front). In this regard, if the Garda Commissioner and the Chief Constable came up with specific measures, the two Governments could do whatever was necessary. Mentioning that the main leaders of the organisation were known, he wondered about the scope for specific action against the dissidents.
8. The **Taoiseach**, in responding, referred to the various security and political advice available to us. The conventional approaches had not and would not work in a situation in which the dissidents only needed a few people on either side to achieve their objectives and existing people could easily as necessary be replaced by others. Describing the situation under the 1972 and 1976 legislation - under which people could be locked up for membership of a proscribed organisation on the word of a Chief Superintendent - he mentioned the different view taken subsequently by the Courts and the need/difficulty in this respect in regard to coming up with the necessary additional hard evidence. Consideration had now to be given as to what could be done legislatively, by other ways.
9. The **Prime Minister** said that, on the security front, we should see what measures the Chief Constable and the Garda Commissioner can come up with in regard to 'lifting those guys out of circulation, without internment'. In response to the Prime Minister, who suggested in this regard that the dissidents were 'mostly in the South', **Teahon** agreed that a significant number were, but that there were also people in the border areas on the Northern side and that it would be important for Ronnie Flanagan to have the capacity to take similar action against those.
10. The **Prime Minister** stated that he felt instinctively that the dissidents were different in that they did not really have any political organisation behind them. He thought that there would be no negative reaction to 'hoovering them up'. In this respect, they differed from the IRA for whom there might have been a certain sympathy in some quarters. The **Taoiseach**, citing the reaction of the public to the Wicklow incident, said that the dissidents did not have public sympathy to any extent. The **Prime Minister** added that in the circumstances we probably had greater political scope for action on the security front, if we did not get into the 'language of political reaction'. The **Taoiseach**, commenting that Ronnie Flanagan and Pat Byrne worked well together as two individuals, and indicating that the Cabinet would be considering the matter on Wednesday, said that if they tell us what is required we will do whatever is needed.

Action on the Political front

11. Turning to the political aspect - the second thing to be addressed - the **Prime Minister**, referring to the meeting he had a little earlier with Gerry Adams and Martin

McGuinness, said that Adams' statement unequivocally condemning the Omagh bombing had been 'helpful'. However, it was important for him to consider making a statement that the war was over or something 'of that ilk'. Given the need to 'hoover up' the extremists and against the background of Unionist fears that the IRA ceasefire was too ill-defined, there was need for greater 'clarity of distinction' from Adams and McGuinness (i.e. in relation to distancing the IRA from the dissidents). There was need for them to send a 'stronger signal'. It would otherwise be difficult to counter the feeling, harboured by the anti-Agreement Unionists in particular, that the IRA and the dissidents were all 'just a spectrum' - something which he, personally, did not believe to be true. Stressing the need for clear political movement, he felt that, in a way, we could overcome the problem of the 'atrocities' if there was political movement, and if Adams offered the necessary clarity and people were made to understand.

12. The **Taoiseach** - indicating he did not disagree - said the issue was what could be said and how it could be put into the proper presentational context. At the brief meeting he had had with Adams and McGuinness in Stormont House immediately prior, he had made the point to them that the issue was what to say and how it should be presented. In this regard, the Prime Minister and himself needed to set the scene, both with Adams/McGuinness and Trimble. Presentationally, they needed to get the matter in context.
13. Indicating that the 'choreography' needed to be got right, the **Prime Minister** said it was in Trimble's interest not to 'focus back on Sinn Féin'. At his meeting later that evening with Trimble, he would speak to him about what his reaction would be to Sinn Féin coming out with a clear statement. That statement would have to have the effect of people understanding that the war was over - and be such as to enable Trimble to say that it was a 'big step forward'. What was needed was to get everyone together soon, on the democratic front. The urgency was dictated not least by the danger that the dissidents would attempt further carnage.
14. Agreeing on the need for urgency, the **Taoiseach** said that while a few days ago we might have been thinking in terms of action by the end of the month, the problem now (in relation to a meeting/agreement between Trimble and Adams) needed to be addressed in quicker time. The two Governments needed to set matters up: we would lean on Sinn Féin and the British on Trimble. **Teahon** added that, particularly given the expected early proposals from Ronnie Flanagan and Pat Byrne, it was very much in Trimble's longer-term interest to lock in Adams and McGuinness. The **Prime Minister** agreed, but said the difficulty lay in getting him to do so. He added that, in truth, it would be very much in Trimble's interest to be 'extremely bold' but he doubted he would see it like that.
15. The **Prime Minister** indicated that the first reaction to Omagh was shock, and anger would be the second. It would be important to slip 'hope' in front of these, as people might otherwise look in other ways. Security was important, but it would be very important to act also on the political front in the next 48 hours. Indicating again that he would push matters with Trimble that evening, he recalled that he had said to Adams that it was important for him to make clear that what had happened in Omagh the previous day was 'in the past', and that (for Sinn Féin and the IRA) there was no

going back. The **Taoiseach** acknowledged the importance of this, especially as the Omagh bombing was seen as an attack on Republicans and given the prospect of IRA 'units' there contemplating going out to settle the score.

16. **Minister O'Donnell** emphasised that it would be important in dealing with Sinn Féin to emphasise the extent to which the dissidents' analysis was misdirected and the space which existed in the current circumstances for Sinn Féin to put maximum distance between that and their own democratic analysis. The **Prime Minister** agreed that now was the time to do this, given the tide of revulsion towards the dissidents which existed within the Republican community. In the right circumstances, the next step then would be to get a meeting of some sort between Trimble and Adams.
17. The **Taoiseach** emphasised that, in taking matters forward on the political front, there would have to be clear understanding between the two sides that if Adams said certain things, Trimble for his part would then respond in a certain way. **Mansergh** said there was a real fear on the Republican side that if they made a move, this would simply be pocketed. (**Jeffrey** responded that Trimble had a mirror fear.) **Teahon** emphasised the danger for the Good Friday Agreement, if the necessary contacts were not created between Trimble and Adams.
18. The **Taoiseach** said there would have to be agreement on both sides. We would have to know Trimble's reaction to what Adams might say, with the two working down the line together. The **Prime Minister** reiterated that, in the British view, it was very much in Trimble's interest to respond to initiatives. **Teahon** felt there was merit in the Prime Minister's suggestion in regard to saying atrocities were in the past. **Mansergh** remarked that there was no easy formula: Sinn Féin were resistant in regard to being pressurised into using particular words. While it might not be possible to get them to say 'the war is over', it might be possible to get something of an equivalent value.
19. The **Prime Minister** said that, beyond whatever words might be used, the explanation offered afterwards in relation to them could prove even more important. The key thing was for Sinn Féin and the IRA to have credible distance from the small dissident splinter group. Beyond short-term security issues, it was important to focus politically on what will keep the Agreement alive. Moderate Unionists needed to be convinced that Gerry Adams - contrary to what a lot of them believed - was not behind the dissidents in some way. Putting matters in context, the **Taoiseach** said that those in the splinter group numbered perhaps 90 in all, including those who stole cars, did look-out etc. Perhaps only a third or less were dangerous activists. The two Governments could not let them succeed. We certainly could not fail because the right words could not be found.
20. **Minister McFall** remarked that at the meeting with Adams and McGuinness they made clear that while they had difficulties with the 'war is over', they had said there could be another formulation of words.
21. In further discussion, the **Taoiseach** indicated that we would endeavour to work on Sinn Féin in regard to getting a formulation of words. The **Prime Minister**, affirming that he would work on Trimble, said it would be important for Sinn Féin to signal matters in a way that would prove acceptable; if they were to say that those days of

atrocities were over, the word 'over' in that statement would be important - and provide Trimble with something he could work with. The **Taoiseach** agreed that it would be important to stress that the events of the previous day were in the past.

22. As regards the mechanics of organising a meeting between Adams and Trimble, the **Prime Minister** said he could call a meeting with both, and then Trimble and Adams could meet together.

Sinn Féin and Decommissioning

23. The **Prime Minister** mentioned that at the meeting with Adams and McGuinness, the latter had indicated that he, like Billy Hutchinson, was meeting General De Chastelain. **Leach** clarified that while the Commission/De Chastelain had regular meetings with the political parties in turn, the difference was that while Hutchinson had been nominated and attended as an intermediary for the UVF, McGuinness had not been nominated and did not attend as intermediary for the IRA. The **Prime Minister** felt that it might nevertheless be of some help if McGuinness were to say publicly that he was in fact engaged in discussions with De Chastelain.
24. **Teahon** suggested that, for Sinn Féin, the formation of the Shadow Executive was on the other side of the scale to decommissioning.
25. **Press Conference:** In a discussion of what might be said to the press following the meeting, it was agreed that both the PM (speaking first) and the Taoiseach would confine their comments to the security aspects, including reference to the meetings to take place the following day between (i) the Garda Commissioner and the Chief Constable and (ii) the Secretary of State and the Minister for Justice. In this regard, the **Prime Minister** remarked that, while the security dimension would 'get us over tonight', people 'tomorrow' would be asking what is the political future.

Other issues covered

26. **Teahon** mentioned that an issue to be addressed (even if it perhaps seemed a little odd to raise it on the occasion of this meeting) was the action to be taken on normalisation of security arrangements. As a separate matter, both sides referred to the positive approaches from the INLA and the cautiously optimistic prospect of a positive outcome.

Kieran Dowling
17 August 1998