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Meeting with British Officials, Belfast, 26 November 1996

Second Secretary Ó hUiginn met with Quentin Thomas in Castle Buildings today at the latter's request. Thomas was accompanied by John McKervall and Ó hUiginn by the undersigned.

Thomas asked for a briefing on last night's meeting between Irish Government officials and a Sinn Féin delegation, which Ó hUiginn supplied.

Ó hUiginn said that the meeting with Sinn Féin had concluded with both sides in fervent agreement that it would be tragic to let go of the present opportunity, notwithstanding disappointment at the terms of the British text. Sinn Féin had asked whether the British text represented London's bottom line. The Government side had given no comfort that this was not the case and, while undertaking to pass on Sinn Féin objections, had sought to highlight their own alternative scenario. Ó hUiginn indicated that there would be further contact by the weekend.

Having thanked Ó hUiginn for this briefing, Thomas sought to emphasise the enormous pressure on the British Government to respond to the Hume/Adams proposals. He suggested that the participants in the negotiations were transfixed by developments in "the other game in town" and he has been told that this was the also the case among Government back-benchers. He noted that the Prime Minister had expressed his desire to act by the end of the month, which would be Saturday, and that, on this basis, he understood that Thursday would be the likely day for publication of any response.

Thomas argued that there was nothing in the proposed British text to exclude the "very early entry" of Sinn Féin to the negotiations, if the ceasefire was couched in positive language and actions on the ground were consistent with this. He also referred to the potential positive impact of subsequent clarification from Sinn Féin.

Ó hUiginn emphasised that any attempt to suggest that Sinn Féin's entry in the negotiations would be conditional on an open-ended British evaluation of the quality of any renewed ceasefire would be regarded by Sinn Féin as a purely tactical response. This could be deeply destabilising within the Republican movement. He urged that the British hold their response until after the weekend.

While undertaking to report this message to his Government, Thomas again stressed the great pressure on the British Government to issue an early response. He claimed that this pressure had increased dramatically as a result of statements of McGuinness and Hume. Ó hUiginn expressed regret at the publicity which had been brought to bear on the present initiative and suggested that Hume was seeking to "hustle" the Republicans into a ceasefire. He said that it would be preferable if people kept to the line that contacts were ongoing. Nevertheless, he pointed out that much of the recent comment had been in reaction to

Trimble's statement following his meeting with the Prime Minister last week, at which he had obviously been briefed on the content of the Prime Minister's intended reply. Thomas pointed out that Trimble had known little of the initiative until recently, although he had been told that the Prime Minister's reply had been passed to Hume and the Irish Government.

Thomas sought to assure Ó hUiginn that the British would not issue a text without telling us. He pointed out that this was necessary as a number of the commitments in the text would require joint action of both Governments.

Ó hUiginn stressed that the Irish Government shared the British sense of urgency, but argued that a response which failed to achieve its intended purpose would be worse than doing nothing. Thomas alluded to the internal difficulties arising from the situation where the Prime Minister decides to act and is being continually being held back by NIO officials on the basis of expectations which fail to materialise. He stressed that powerful arguments would be required to persuade the Prime Minister not to issue his statement on Thursday.

Ó hUiginn replied that the British had to decide if they wanted a new ceasefire; if not we were all wasting our time. He argued that Sinn Féin were asking for practically nothing in return for a ceasefire; the Prime Minister himself had said he was not going beyond existing British policy. He argued that for the Prime Minister to issue a statement along the lines of the current text would cause him to fall between two stools; he would be blamed by many for having tried at all, but would have achieved no gain.

Thomas asked whether, if the Prime Minister did agree to delay, there was any real sense on the Irish side that Sinn Féin would not come forward with something as equally undeliverable as entry as of right. Ó hUiginn replied that Sinn Féin appeared to be taking on board the realities of the situation, but they continued to feel that the British were seeking to amend the conditions of entry. He said that the Irish Government had reluctantly registered that the British would not buy early entry and were trying to sell the idea of a long recess. He hoped that it would be possible to sweeten a two month wait with bilaterals and with a private acceptance of the Mitchell principles. (Thomas remarked that such a commitment would have to be repeated in formal session.)

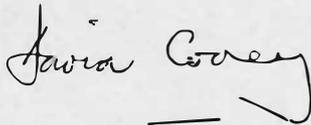
Thomas reflected on the possible attractions of an early adjournment, expressing surprise that Senator Mitchell appeared to envisage carrying on late into December. Ó hUiginn suggested that it would be preferable if the talks were suspended before the announcement of a ceasefire. Thomas pointed to the benefits of early end to the current dispute over decommissioning. However, he noted that, for this to take place, the UUP would have to abandon their demand for the surrender of weapons prior to Sinn Féin's entry into the talks in full defiance of the DUP and the UKUP. If this could be done, it would be possible to start work on the three strands in January. Ó hUiginn agreed, but expressed doubt that this could be achieved in the current circumstances.

Cooney wondered whether, rather than expecting the UUP to climb down in December on decommissioning, and again in January on Sinn Féin entry, it might be more practical to invite them to take this medicine in one dose. He sketched out a scenario whereby the

Governments might indicate next week that, in view of the impasse on decommissioning, the formal negotiations would be suspended to allow the Governments and the Independent Chairmen to engage in bilateral contacts with the parties with a view to identifying a way forward. If, in the meantime, there was a ceasefire, the negotiations might resume at the end of January with Sinn Féin at the table and on the basis of an agreed mechanism for handling decommissioning. The UUP would be able to justify their presence on the basis of their commitment to secure a peaceful and negotiated settlement.

Ó hUiginn argued that it was necessary to integrate the negotiations with the ceasefire initiative and suggested that an eight week gap would provide an opportunity to do this. Thomas agreed, and expressed the hope, although only the hope, that a cleanly observed ceasefire would improve the atmosphere on decommissioning. He stressed that words would help, and remarked that Mc Guinness's recent reference to the International Body's Report had been "really rather good". Ó hUiginn suggested that the fact that the IRA was prepared to work on the basis of the Mitchell Report represented an enormous development compared with a few years ago.

In concluding the meeting, Thomas thanked Ó hUiginn for fleshing out his understanding of yesterday night's discussions. He admitted that there had been concern on the British side over what they perceived to be a lack of urgency; there seemed to be no end point in view, and the British fear was that the process could drag on for months. He would report back the situation to his Government. It was agreed that close contact would be maintained.



David Cooney
26 November 1996