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TACKS
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Counsellors A.I. Section,
Messrs Teahon, Donlon,
Murray & Dalton
Ambassadors London &
Washington, Joint Secretary

Meeting of Liaison Group, 30 January 1996

Summary Report

The meeting focussed on the meeting of the Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Conference to be held on 1 February, and considered how to advance preparations for all-party negotiations in the light of the Report of the International Body and the Prime Minister's statement on it.

2. The Irish side, while emphasising our desire to avoid polemics and to look to the future, took the opportunity to register the damage done by the events of the past week to mutual trust and confidence at the highest levels. The British side sought to reassure us of their full commitment to a partnership approach, while suggesting that a lack of time had been a factor.
3. Looking ahead to the meeting of the Conference, we argued that while good atmospherics would be valuable, they would be unable to disguise an absence of substantive agreement on how to proceed. We therefore sought British reactions to the approach proposed in the Taoiseach's letter of 26 January.
4. We proposed that attention should be refocussed on the International Body's Report, and in particular on whether the six principles set out in it, and the approach it envisaged to decommissioning, would be acceptable as a basis for all-party negotiations. The British questioned whether the Report by itself offered as complete or clear a basis for negotiations as we suggested, and argued that further work, including on the possibility of an elective process, would in any event inevitably have been necessary.
5. While accepting that a range of practical issues remained to be addressed in the political track, we disputed what we suggested was their avoidance of the Report's central thrust, that the six principles taken together represented a means of overcoming the decommissioning impasse. They had made a premature assessment that this was unachievable.

6. The British said that the Prime Minister's statement had succeeded in getting him off the decommissioning hook without losing the support of his party. Just as the Report had presented the IRA's rejection of Washington 3 as a reality, so also the Unionists' refusal to enter into talks without elections was a reality. The Prime Minister had short-circuited fruitless debate by concentrating attention on this. They denied that they had bought into a Unionist agenda. What now had to be done was to try to mould Unionist thinking on elections into a form which was workable and broadly acceptable.
7. We countered by suggesting that the British had at no point made any public attempt to challenge the Unionists or to encourage them to engage in the political track. Indeed, last week's statement had effectively rewarded their intransigence, as the only parties which had refused to take part in preparatory talks. This had the effect of feeding nationalist despondency about the future of the peace process. We emphasised that David Trimble's willingness to enter into dialogue would be perceived as a key indicator of whether the British would be capable of getting him into negotiations even with an election.
8. The British saw some signs of hope in aspects of the UUP's presentation of their thinking on elections, and in the fact that they were in dialogue with the SDLP, and might soon be meeting the Government.
9. The two sides agreed that at the Conference Ministers might concur on the need to re-intensify work in the political track and to use it to discuss the Body's Report with the parties. We suggested that, given the evident gap between the Irish approach as set out in the Taoiseach's letter and the British side's indications of their response to it, one area of potential common ground could be an agreed schedule of meetings up to the planned Summit. Two specific possibilities to be considered should be a joint approach to the Unionist parties, and a move to multilateral meetings. The British were hesitant, saying that it was a question of how in practical terms the Unionists might be encouraged to move in a positive direction.
10. It was agreed that in advance of the Conference the Anglo-Irish Secretariat would work

on a draft communiqué (the Irish side would prepare the first draft) and on the possible schedule for meetings in the political track.

11. At the end of the meeting the British handed over a paper (attached) entitled "A Possible Framework for Inclusive Negotiations on a Political Accommodation Which Would Address All Relevant Relationships" (which includes a section on a possible role for an election). This paper was not discussed.



Rory Montgomery

30 January 1996