



# An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

**Reference Code:** 2021/107/30

**Creator(s):** Department of Justice

**Accession Conditions:** Open

**Copyright:** National Archives, Ireland. May only be reproduced with the written permission of the Director of the National Archives.

**Secure Fax: 508**

28 May 1997

No of pages including this one: 3

To: HQ  
 For: Second Secretary O hUiginn

From: Belfast  
 From: Joint Secretary

**Subj: British Government meeting with Sinn Féin (28 May)**

VE  
28/5  
PST: PSS: Messrs. Teahon,  
 Donlon & Dalton;  
 Ambassadors London &  
 Washington: Joint Secretary  
 Counsellors A-1

508/1

COPY TO
MR O'DONNELL
MR HICKEY
MR BROSNAN
MR FAY
MR CALLAGHAN
Ms LARKIN

1. To confirm, I have obtained the following read-out on today's meeting between British Government officials and Sinn Féin at Stormont Castle.
2. The meeting ran from noon until approximately 3pm, with a short break for lunch. The British side consisted of Quentin Thomas, Jonathan Stephens and Chris McCabe. Peter Bell understands that the Sinn Féin delegation was unchanged from last time (Martin McGuinness, Gerry Kelly, Caoimhín O Caolain and Siobhan O Hanlon).
3. Today's meeting did not go as well as last week's. The atmosphere was distinctly more combative, with "a lot of hard pounding" on both sides and, it seems, virtually no meeting of minds. The British side's impression was that Sinn Féin were under instructions to express disappointment at whatever British proposal was advanced, though not to take matters to the point of abandoning the dialogue.
4. The British officials opened with a lengthy presentation, approved by Ministers, which set out the new Government's approach to the peace process and reaffirmed the British commitment to the Anglo-Irish Agreement, the Joint Declaration and the Framework Document. They also underlined the new Government's intention to introduce confidence-building measures aimed at both Unionists and nationalists.
5. Taking Sinn Féin through the Entry to Negotiations Act, Thomas highlighted the legal obligation on the Secretary of State to invite Sinn Féin to participate in the talks once the requirements of the legislation have been met. He told Sinn Féin that there would be consultation with the Irish Government in the latter respect. He and his colleagues indicated that some time would be required following a ceasefire declaration to ensure continuing compliance with the latter in word and deed.

508/2

2

6. In terms which reflected the discussion at yesterday's Liaison Group meeting, Thomas floated the idea of an adjournment of the talks by Senator Mitchell following a ceasefire declaration. Sinn Féin would be invited to make an early commitment to the Mitchell Principles during this period. Contact with British Ministers and access to Castle Buildings were also promised. Thomas emphasised that the British Government would not be seeking unnecessary delay in relation to Sinn Féin's entry to the talks and that no preconditions would attach to entry beyond the requirements of the legislation.
7. A further point made was that the British Government were prepared in principle to set a date for Sinn Féin's entry but could not do so at the present juncture.
8. Thomas wound up by emphasising that the change of Government had lent a new impetus to the peace process and that the door was now open to Sinn Féin's participation. However, they needed collateral for Sinn Féin's protestations about their commitment to peace and democratic politics.
9. The Sinn Féin response was that they found this presentation very disappointing.

The distance between the two sides remained considerable when the discussion turned in detail to the four key Sinn Féin concerns:

- On the time-frame issue, the British officials referred again to the May 1998 deadline in the legislation. However, Sinn Féin stuck to their previous position that the talks should be completed within six months;
- On confidence-building measures, Sinn Féin, who had been noticeably vague on this subject at the last meeting, made clear that they wanted virtually an agreed programme of measures, among which they awarded priority to prisoner issues;
- On decommissioning, there was a lengthy and fairly unproductive exchange. The British side emphasised the central importance of the Mitchell Report and the need to resolve this issue by sufficient consensus. They were not seeking to create unnecessary blockages but there was a problem here which had to be cracked. "Something approaching agreement" between the two sides was

508/3

3

reached on the machinery for the handling of decommissioning (a sub-committee and the Commission). However, in general terms, Sinn Féin expressed deep unhappiness at the line taken by Thomas and his colleagues, complaining that what it amounted to in practice was that Trimble would have a veto on the decommissioning issue and, therefore, on the negotiations as a whole. The British response was to reiterate that this problem had to be resolved;

- On the entry date issue, Sinn Féin stuck to their demands for immediate entry following a ceasefire declaration. They were not impressed by the scenario painted by the British to cover the period while the ceasefire was being tested, commenting that this amounted all too plainly to a "decontamination" exercise and was unacceptable.
- 10. Thomas recalled that John Hume had indicated to the British Government last year that the 10 October document could deliver a ceasefire. He suggested that the current British approach went beyond the 10 October text in some respects. The new Government were travelling some distance to get Sinn Féin into the talks and there would have to be some reciprocation on Sinn Féin's part. He asked Sinn Féin whether or not they were serious about the present exercise. When he asked them what particular outcome they wished to see from the current contacts, the response was to the effect that they "did not know".
- 11. Referring to current media speculation about a possible IRA ceasefire in the autumn, Thomas enquired in general terms if this was the time-frame envisaged by the Republican movement. He emphasised the British Government's desire to make progress as soon as possible, "beginning now". In response, Sinn Féin said that they also wished to make rapid progress but did not offer any clearer commitment.
- 12. Despite the negative tone of the discussion, there was agreement in principle to have another meeting, though this will not be possible next week because of Sinn Féin's commitments in our election campaign.
- 13. I understand that no particular arrangements were made in respect of media briefing on today's meeting.