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Phone call from Mr. Quentin Thomas

COPY TO: 3015197
MR O'DONNELL
MR HICKEY
MR BROSINAN
MR FAY
MR CALLAGHAN
Ms LARKIN

1. I had a phone call from Mr. Quentin Thomas this morning to give his lead out of yesterday's meeting with Sinn Féin.
2. He said that the British had found Sinn Féin very much in the "Oliver Twist mode" - resolutely asking for more. He had asked them at the beginning of the meeting what they envisaged as the end product? (e.g. did they want a letter or speech from the British side). The Sinn Féin response had been vague on this. Thomas had the distinct impression that they were playing the situation long.
3. Thomas had recalled for them the previous exchanges on the timeframe. The May '98 deadline could be formalised for them by the Governments if they wanted that. They were non-committal.
4. In the discussion on confidence-building measures, they had laid stress on prisoners issues. They were dismissive however of the general commitments in the Queen's speech and Labour policy generally, even though Thomas had pointed out that the commitment to legislate was an engagement of a high order. He said that if they were insisting on a specific shopping list of measures as a pre-condition, the process could take a very long time. They rejected the notion of pre-condition, but seemed dissatisfied at any mere general undertaking that the British Government would be the sponsor for positive change in this area.
5. The main part of the discussion dealt with decommissioning. They expressed serious disappointment that the two Governments had not resolved the issue, and demanded to know what they were doing to remove the blockage. Thomas pointed out that if the issue was to be dealt with to the satisfaction of all participants, it could simply not be "lost". The rule of sufficient consensus meant it had to be dealt with in a way that satisfied both the SDLP and the UUP. Sinn

Féin saw the application of sufficient consensus to this process as amounting simply to a unionist veto. Thomas had emphasised some positive dimensions of the current intergovernmental thinking (implementation of all aspects of the Mitchell Report, sub-committee to take matters forward, etc.). His personal view was that the Governments had perhaps underestimated how “unsighted” Sinn Féin were on this issue. They seemed very amenable on certain aspects, e.g. the sub-committee, but extremely suspicious on others.

6. On the entry process, Thomas had tried to reassure them that the British fully understood that the scenario where they called a ceasefire and remained outside the Talks put them in a false position. He had rehearsed various ideas to manage a post-ceasefire interval (adjournment, bilateral/trilateral talks, ultimately access to the office in Castle Buildings, etc.). He had made clear that the British were not writing off the summer in terms Sinn Féin admission. He had repeated also the positive points he had made at the first meeting on this issue. He had had however no sense of comfort from Sinn Féin of any flexibility on their part, or any sense that Sinn Féin were narrowing down the obstacles to this particular agenda item.
7. Towards the end of the meeting, Thomas had recalled statements on their behalf by John Hume and others that a ceasefire was on offer in return for the “10th October” paper. He said that the current British position was in advance of 10th October paper in a number of respects. He offered to develop this analysis for them at this or a future meeting. Sinn Féin challenged the notion that the current position was in advance of the 10th October position.
8. There was agreement in principle on another meeting, but the date was left open until the Sinn Féin delegation returned from South Africa.
9. I said to Thomas that we were disappointed at the outcome of the meeting. We would be conveying that disappointment to Sinn Féin also. It appeared very much from the accounts of the meeting that they had gone in in a stalling mode. It

remained to be seen whether that was related to some short-term tactic (elections here ?, state of internal debate ?, holding operation pending return from South Africa ?).

10. I gave my own personal view that one of the keys to the situation probably remained the decommissioning issue. Sinn Féin had a genuine problem that if they used up their last opportunity to get into talks, and these talks turned out to be a decommissioning trap, then they would be in an untenable situation. The Governments should advance as far as possible in those circumstances their joint position on decommissioning, with a view to avoiding it blocking the process. If Sinn Féin continue to stall after that, we could be quite certain that they were indeed "playing it long" whether for sinister or other reasons. If, on the other hand, the decommissioning crux was the real kernel of the difficulty, then if that were solved, other things could fall into place very quickly. I told Thomas we were concerned not only with the fact that a useful meeting had been wasted, but that the timeframe, working back from a likely Summer break, was now making it more and more difficult to envisage a scenario which bedded down a ceasefire before then.
11. Thomas said that they did not have difficulty with added meetings with Sinn Féin, provided they were able to report honestly to his Ministers that things were advancing. Further meetings like yesterday's would make that thesis very hard to sustain. He was personally to some extent resigned to a likely "two steps forward, one step back" approach by Sinn Féin, and would not wish to draw definitive or premature conclusions from one disappointing meeting.

Sean Ó hUiginn
29 May 1997

cc: PST
PSS
✓ VE
✓ 29/5
✓ Mr. P. Teahon
✓ Mr. T. Dalton
Joint Secretary
Ambassador London & Washington