



# An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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SECRET

Official-Level Meeting with Sinn Féin, Friday, 23 January, 1998

1. Following is a summary of the key points arising at this meeting. A list of those present is attached.
2. The official side passed to Sinn Féin, informally, for their views, a copy of a paper setting out some initial internal draft thinking on North-South structures.
3. The official side briefed Sinn Féin on the current state of preparations for the 26 to 28 January session of the talks, having regard in particular to the stand-off at the previous day's Liaison Group meeting. Sinn Féin expressed strong opposition to the idea of an options-type paper on Strand Two. They also urged that, in the event that it did not prove possible for the two Governments to agree a paper on Strand Two in time for the opening session, the British should be discouraged from any thoughts of tabling a paper on Strand One. It was agreed that contact would be made with Sinn Féin over the week-end to brief them in the event of agreement with the British on the terms of a Strand Two paper.
4. The Sinn Féin side emphasised that they wanted to see the Framework document - which was not without difficulties for them - pushed out to the very farthest parameters. The Irish Government had to be embedded in the life of the Six Counties and there had to be a sense that the arrangements arising from the talks were transitional and that they were a bridge in the direction of a United Ireland. Sinn Féin were also concerned that the Unionists should not be able to exercise a veto through the Assembly. The official side expressed confidence that the British Prime Minister was committed to a Framework Document outcome and believed it was attainable in substance. They suggested that it would be no harm if Sinn Féin conveyed directly to No. 10 their concern that whatever arrangements were agreed at the talks should have the capacity to evolve.
5. Sinn Féin also cautioned that the entire focus in the talks at present seemed to be on institutions, whereas there needed to be a parallel concentration on the equality agenda. There would be no settlement without the grass roots and issues like prisoners, the RUC, equality and symbolism (the issues which were "in people's faces") had to be addressed if they were to come on board. [Reference was made to the difficulty of securing the necessary two-thirds majority, at an Ard-Fheis, in favour of an Assembly while issues such as prisoners were outstanding.]
6. It was suggested that Sinn Féin's position on an Assembly had more in common with the Unionists, who seemed to have in mind a committee system than with the SDLP, who favoured a Cabinet-style Government. Sinn Féin responded that Sinn Féin would be looking for full powers across the board, in order to provide a powerful foundation for the Belfast/Dublin axis. [In referring to the Assembly, Sinn Féin made clear that they were doing so on the basis that the meeting was a "without prejudice engagement"].

7. The Sinn Féin side referred to "huge strains" within the Republican movement at present and recalled that they had sold the idea of a cessation to the IRA on both occasions on the basis that there was an alternative to violence and that there would be a shared focus on the goal of unity, as well as on issues such as demilitarisation and equality. Sinn Féin also referred to the need for transparent communications between the SDLP, Sinn Féin and the Irish Government and for there to be "no ambushes".
8. Sinn Féin suggested that there was a need for a structured programme of Ministerial visits to the North. Responding to a point made about friction with the SDLP over the organisation of such visits, they indicated that their people had been instructed to pull back from conflict of this sort - and they asked to be told if this wasn't having the desired effect.
9. On the recent killings in Northern Ireland, the official side indicated that it was understood that Prime Minister Blair had given a clear message that he would consider the response of the security forces to be a test of their objectivity. Sinn Féin cautioned that the Taoiseach and the Government should be very careful about what they said on the question of the UDP's continued participation in the talks - many people would be inclined to question whether the IRA would get away with killings on this scale. On the same subject, Sinn Féin said that the UDP had taken a definite decision to end their ceasefire, whereas the UVF was holding to its ceasefire. Sinn Féin also made the point that against the background of the killings, it was all the more important to make political progress and to reassure the Nationalists that people were trying to make progress on their behalf: if Nationalists came to feel they were being slaughtered for nothing, they would lose their resilience.
10. The Sinn Féin side asked as to the latest state of play in regard to the Irish and British Governments' consideration of constitutional change. The official side suggested that Sinn Féin should contact Dr Mansergh if they wished to discuss detail in this regard. Sinn Féin mentioned that they believed that on the British side, it would be a question of covering not just the Government of Ireland Act but "all these Acts", including the Act of Union and the 1973 Northern Ireland Constitution Act.
11. Referring to the Propositions document, Sinn Féin indicated that it would need to be made clear in the next document that the North/South Council was a stand-alone body. It would also need to be made clearer that the North/South Council was not subordinate to the Council of the Islands. In addition, it would be necessary to restate the commitment to equality (as opposed to equity) even if only in terms of a pointer to a future paper. It was agreed that it would be useful for the official and Sinn Féin sides to have a series of meetings on the various talks documents so as to ensure the greatest possible degree of mutual understanding.
12. Sinn Féin also enquired as to whether there were plans for any further prisoner releases, pointing out that it helped to keep things alive if somebody was (constantly) doing something.

S. I. Done.

**Attendance**

Mr Paddy Teahon, Secretary General, Department of the Taoiseach  
Mr Dermot Gallagher, Second Secretary, Department of Foreign Affairs  
Mr Simon Hare, Principal Officer, Department of the Taoiseach

Mr Gerry Adams, President, Sinn Féin  
Mr Aidan McAteer, Sinn Féin  
Ms Rita O'Hare, Sinn Féin  
Ms Barbara de Bruin, Sinn Féin