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MICHAEL ANCRAM SPEAKING AFTER TALKS WITH SINN FEIN AT STORMONT  
29 MAY 1995

Michael Ancram

As you know, we had a long and full discussion with the Sinn Fein delegation today. The meeting lasted about 3½ hours with two breaks during it. The structure of the meeting was as follows. We opened up with formal opening statements. We then discussed for some time the reasons why the Government insists on progress being made on decommissioning of arms and I was able to explain to them that if we were to get to round table talks it would have to be on the basis that all parties went there armed only with their mandates, otherwise those talks in practical terms would not take place, and after a very full and forthright discussion of that we discussed the elements of decommissioning. They have taken away a paper covering those elements and we have agreed to return to that in the future. After a break they came back and discussed what they term as demilitarisation and I was able to explain to them that in accordance with the speech made by the Secretary of State in Coleraine in 1992, the onset of peace had allowed de-escalatory measures to be taken in terms of security, and as peace becomes established those de-escalatory measures will hopefully continue to be available. We discussed a number of other issues in brief, but in particular at the end we discussed with them the question of the equality of treatment which they had raised in their opening statement. And I was able to make clear to them that my presence at today's talks was an indication of something we have confirmed before that we accept their electoral mandate, that we wish to move the process forward positively and constructively with them in exploratory talks. I made it clear that contingent obviously on my being available to them in terms of these talks that we would also allow contacts between councillors and Ministers to take place as a logical consequence of that so long as their involvement with me in talks continues. At the end I said to them that I thought we had had a very full discussion. It had been useful because we had had a chance across a table to put our position clearly and firmly on that table and to explain the reasons behind our position. Having done so, I suggested that it would be useful to have another meeting soon. I

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I've offered them three dates next week because I wish to see the momentum continue and they have said that they will come back to me. As you know, they also asked me to pass on to Sir Patrick Mayhew a request that he should invite their President to attend bilateral political substantive talks. I again made clear to them the elements that would require to be fulfilled in terms of decommissioning of arms for that to become possible but said to them that I would report on the meeting to the Secretary of State.

Interviewer

Can you describe the atmosphere today?

Michael Ancram

The atmosphere was forthright. We had a chance very firmly to put on the table our position and to explain the reasoning behind our position. I was able to make it clear, for instance, that our concerns about decommissioning were very much shared by the people of Northern Ireland, but it was a practical and political reality that unless progress was made on this front in a substantive way we were not going to reach a position where parties would come round a table in order to be able to achieve the comprehensive settlement that all of us see as the final objective. It was a hard meeting, it was a forthright meeting, but it was a business-like meeting and one, I hope, we can continue in a future meeting in the near future.

Interviewer

Were you satisfied by your discussions on the decommissioning of IRA weapons?

Michael Ancram

The point this morning was to begin those discussions. We discussed the various elements of decommissioning, modalities, questions of verification and we have, as I say, put a paper to them which they took and they have said that they will consider the elements in that paper.

**Interviewer**

Mr Ancram, will no Ministerial meetings though with Sir Patrick Mayhew now take place unless you've got some progress on the question of decommissioning. Are you categoric about that or what is your position?

**Michael Ancram**

What we have made clear, and we have made clear over a very long period of time, is that if we are to move out of exploratory dialogue into substantive political dialogue there has to be progress on the decommissioning question in terms of three very clear elements. The first is that there has to be an agreement in principle to a progressive decommissioning of arms. Secondly, there has to be an agreement on the way that decommissioning will take place and thirdly, there has to be some decommissioning happening as an indication that their intent is serious. And we've said once that is in place, then we can move from exploratory dialogue to substantive political dialogue.

**Interviewer**

Are you hopeful after today's meeting?

**Michael Ancram**

I think today has been a useful meeting in the sense that we were, as I say, able, across a table, to put our positions clearly to each other in a way that often in the past has only been possible through the media and I hope that we have left them in no doubt about our determination to try and secure a lasting peace in Northern Ireland and a comprehensive and agreed political settlement.

**Interviewer**

Were you impressed with Sinn Fein's apparent determination to have peace in Northern Ireland?

**Michael Ancram**

They made it clear to me that they were committed to the achievement of peace in Northern Ireland. We agreed that this was a process which had to be taken forward and the discussion today was largely about elements of that process.

**Interviewer**

Were you meeting a Sinn Fein delegation today with links to the IRA or were you meeting a Sinn Fein delegation, some of whose members are senior members of the IRA?

**Michael Ancram**

I was talking to Sinn Fein on the understanding which they did not contradict that they had influence over the IRA which they would wish to use in their own way, as they said to me. I made it clear that I was speaking to them because I believed that they had that influence and I hoped that they would be able to use it because that is the only way that the process can in effect be taken forward.

**Interviewer**

When you shook hands with these people today, what were the emotions going through your head, given the background of what happened at Brighton and places like it. How did you personally feel?

**Michael Ancram**

I shook hands with them when they came in on a formal basis as I would any delegation I meet. This was a significant meeting, but it was one step in a process and that was how I dealt with it and that is why I'm keen to see this process continue. It is why I have offered them three days next week and I hope they will be able to take up one of those days so we can continue that process.

**Interviewer**

Minister, whenever they raised issues like policing, like prisoners etc, what did you have to say to them?

Michael Ancram

Well we didn't actually talk about policing. We talked briefly about prisoners and I suggested to them as this was an important issue this was one of the matters we might consider at a future meeting and that is something obviously I will await to hear from them about.

Interviewer

How long do you believe you've got to conduct this exploratory round of talks before the peace process is derailed?

Michael Ancram

I hope obviously that the elements which are needed to be put in place to take the process forward to a substantive political dialogue will be forthcoming. I'm very keen to see this dialogue progressing, I'm very keen to see us moving as soon as we can to an inclusive, comprehensive dialogue from which we might reach agreement between all the parties, but it is for the parties and particularly for Sinn Fein in this instance to take this matter forward. They know what requires to be done. The British Government all along has made it absolutely clear that we are determined to achieve a peaceful settlement and an agreed political settlement and we wish to take it forward, but we can only do so on the basis of the clear understandings and commitments which I outlined today.

Interviewer

Did they question you about what the Unionists said after their meeting with Sir Patrick Mayhew yesterday?

Michael Ancram

They asked me what the status of my position was and I made it clear that as Sir Patrick has made clear, that the position in relation to Ministers in talks is a flexible one, that Ministers are put forward in talks where they are relevant to the particular matters under discussion and that that is the position in relation to all the talks that are taking place at the moment.

Interviewer

Is it absolutely clear that there must be some physical decommissioning of some weapons before Sinn Fein can be admitted to the next stage?

Michael Ancram

I have made it clear again today, as Sir Patrick made it clear when he was in the United States earlier in the year, that there are the three elements, an agreement in principle to a progressive decommissioning, an agreement on how it will happen and some decommissioning to show that that intent is serious.