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BÉAL FEIRSTE

BELFAST

27

15 May 1995

Confidential

Mr Sean O hUiginn,
Second Secretary,
Anglo-Irish Division,
Department of Foreign Affairs.

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Dear Second Secretary,

Decommissioning: a gesture by Sinn Fein?

I said I would write to confirm my oral report last Friday of conversation with the Secretary of State and senior NIO officials on this issue.

The occasion was a small dinner given formally by BMG at Admiralty House in London for the former British Ambassador in Dublin, David Blatherwick, who has spent the last couple of months preparing for Cairo; he leaves this weekend. The Secretary of State and Lady Mayhew "presided" as the invitation put it. The only others present were senior members of the NIO.

The Secretary of State opened out discussion over dinner on how he should respond to the Sinn Fein demand to meet him. You will recall that at the Liaison Group on Thursday afternoon, the British suggested that while a meeting between Adams and the Secretary of State in substantive mode was out of the question, it might be possible in exploratory mode with particular reference to decommissioning. The following day, Ancram wrote a letter to McGuinness which I have not been given but which seemed to leave open the second possibility; it has been interpreted in the media as a softening of the Government's line.

The Secretary of State seemed preoccupied with the question: what do I get for meeting them at all?

I referred to difficulties which the Sinn Fein/IRA leadership were experiencing in the ranks, which the British side acknowledged, and stressed the importance of moving gradually but steadily to inclusive talks. I doubted if Sinn Fein were insisting on an immediate meeting with the Secretary of State, but I thought they would not be content to be left to meet Michael Ancram in exploratory dialogue for much longer while others met the Secretary of State in substantive talks even if, in practice, there was not much difference in content between the two.

I thought he and Ancram had given themselves room for manoeuvre and had not allowed the UUP to paint them into a corner on the issue of who would meet whom. The Secretary of State had been wise to say after his meeting with the Unionists that he expected each side would be flexible as regards representation. The immediate important political point for the British seemed to be the formal status of the talks with Sinn Fein, not the level of representation. Could he not agree to meet Adams in exploratory dialogue? Could the removal of the ban on Ministerial meetings not allow for Ministers, including at an appropriate time, the Prime Minister, to meet Sinn Fein to discuss issues such as economic development? The Prime Minister had already had such discussions with the parties together and separately. Perhaps opportunities could be manufactured if necessary? The Secretary of State was not precluding a conversation with Adams at the Washington Investment Conference (no dissent). Could other occasions not be taken to have substantive contacts with Sinn Fein? The important thing, however it was done, was to build confidence on all sides and move the talks along.

Mayhew asked again what Sinn Fein would give in return for a meeting with him, even allowing that he could afford to undermine Michael Ancram, as he feared he might, by meeting them himself.

The idea in his mind was a decommissioning of weapons, specifically semtex. He referred me to recent remarks by the Taoiseach which he had found encouraging for this purpose. He said he had been encouraged also by several recent contacts with John Hume who had told him he was working on Sinn Fein to give up some semtex; Hume had repeated this to him only that afternoon.

I said Hume was a far superior analyst of Sinn Fein than I could pretend to be, but I wondered if this was a productive avenue (I did not ask if he was reading Hume right as I gathered from you this morning he might not be).

I doubted if at this stage Sinn Fein could arrange such a gesture, or if they would want to. They would be asked what would be demanded for the next meeting, more semtex, a Barratt rifle? I wondered too if gestures would really suit Sir Patrick's political needs. The first question Unionists and Conservative backbenchers would ask was: where's the rest of the semtex? They would ask what he would demand for the next meeting. What would the Prime Minister demand? Should not Michael Ancram be insisting on something? Rather than relieving pressure, he might compound it. I thought it would be a political mistake at this stage to tie meetings with him or anyone else to specific gestures in this area. It might be more sensible, as well as more possible, to get Sinn Fein to influence the political atmosphere, in particular to lessen the continuing sense of threat, by making statements of reassurance about their intentions by calming their street protest campaign or even by drawing back from some of their targetting. The issue of the retention of weapons and semtex

was, as he knew, a secondary one for the security forces. Their sense of threat lay principally in the capacity of the IRA to home-produce weapons.

Mayhew did not dissent from this analysis but referred to the Washington text and asked again what he could say to people to justify a meeting between him and Sinn Fein. He referred to the pressures on him, mentioning that he had been roundly jeered at several places during the recent VE Day visit of the Duke of York, and that he was being accused of constantly shifting his ground on the decommissioning issue. I said that apart from the encouragement of a change in the political atmosphere which could itself reduce the sense of pressure he felt, he should emphasise that the peace had continued for more than eight months, that retail sales were booming, that tourism was increasing, that inward investment was looking more rosy etc. He should not allow his critics to ignore the principal point which was not the retention of the guns but their silence. I recalled an eloquent answer, stressing the blessings of peace, which the Prime Minister had given to Ken Maginnis in the Commons after the launch of the Framework Documents.

The Secretary of State referred again to the Taoiseach's remarks in the Dail on 25 April and other statements. I said we had pointed out in the Secretariat and at the Liaison Group, that the British were noticing the remarks they liked and ignoring others. They needed to look at the Taoiseach's remarks in toto. For example, he had said in the Dail that he did not want to simply go on repeating points about decommissioning because he did not want to create psychological obstacles and because there were other relevant issues. He had also warned against pre-conditions and setting too many semantic barriers between one set of discussions and others.

I thought that too much emphasis had been placed on the dangers of resumption, not enough on the continuance of peace; too much on the practicalities of decommissioning as the way of dealing with the sense of threat that people felt. I could agree that Unionists would not sit down with Sinn Fein at the present time but that was not simply because they retained weapons; time needed to pass and a more constructive political context needed to be built. As that happened, I could foresee some decommissioning but I doubted if the IRA's great card would be entirely and verifiably thrown away before a conclusion of talks, still less before they had begun in earnest; they had many historical precedents to sustain them.

There were several interventions from Blatherwick, Chilcot and Williams challenging these views (Thomas and Bell seemed more reticent). Blatherwick was especially worrying. Whereas I had the impression that the Secretary of State's main interest was in getting out of an immediate hole for which one gesture might be enough, Blatherwick said it was entirely consistent with other precedents that gestures of decommissioning should be made at every step of the way. He suggested that this was precisely what the British were determined to achieve. The Secretary of State came back to the issue of where Sinn Fein

and the IRA were coming from and to the fears they aroused. He said he could not move from the Washington text (which seems to have assumed a canonical importance in the British mind). I said it had been very risky to require a gesture of giving up some weapons and urged him to place emphasis on the two other more elastic points in the Washington text, ie, that Sinn Fein must show they are serious about decommissioning and are prepared to discuss modalities. The Secretary of State repeated that he felt he could not move, even in emphasis, from the three requirements in the text.

In an attempt to explain the underlying situation, I said that the policy of both Governments until recent years had been to play the middle against the extremes. That was the rationale behind Sunningdale and behind the Anglo-Irish Agreement. If I could be permitted to say so, if the British had stood fast behind the Sunningdale Executive, or if they had implemented the Agreement in the manner intended in 1986/7, that policy might have worked. But it had not, and consideration had been given to another approach which might be called playing the extremes into the middle. That political call had now been made by the two Governments in the Joint Declaration; it was not a call everyone had been comfortable with, including, to be candid, myself; it held dangers; but it had been made and it had to be given every chance of permanent success. If the whole process fell apart and violence resumed as fiercely as ever, it might be said by some that the British had been wise all along to set the decommissioning of some semtex as a condition for talking; but I thought it would be said by most that severe blame lay with both Governments, with the British for not being more forward and with ourselves for not persuading them to be so. Sinn Fein understood that well.

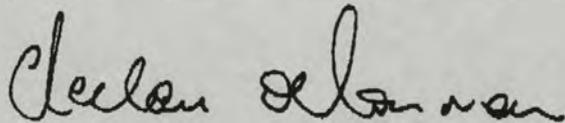
Mayhew listened carefully to this presentation and made some complimentary remarks but he remained fixed on the delivery of the third requirement in the Washington text, the decommissioning gesture. It seemed to me from what he said, and from the manner in which some of the others intervened, that some decision had made to go all out to achieve it; and that optimism had been raised by their sense that the Taoiseach and John Hume were in sympathy and trying to help. At the same time, I thought that Mayhew understood the pitfalls and was not unhappy that I had spelt some of them out.

The Secretary of State went out of his way at dinner and in private conversation afterwards to say he was prepared to move on prisons issues, to concede on "small things" that were asked for under the current regime, but also to use the life sentence review system in a helpful way. He referred to a letter recently received from the Cardinal representing the views of prison chaplains on both sides. His main difficulty was timing - and here there was a connection with a Sinn Fein gesture on decommissioning - and with the return of the 50% remission for determinate sentence prisoners, which had been cut to one third by Mrs Thatcher in the late 1980s.

He came back later, somewhat emotionally, to the view that people could not be rewarded for agreeing not to kill any more. I have been around this issue with him before, with reference in particular to his own legal background and natural reluctance to interfere with determinations of the courts. I said the brutal reality was that, in the end of the day, people would gain something from agreeing not to kill anymore; but I pointed out to him that the whole element of likelihood of reoffending was an element in the review system anyway; I added that behind the cries of outrage with which I could sympathise, the public placed a greater priority on the securing of permanent peace.

Lastly, I might mention that I had a long conversation with Lady Mayhew, one of a number over the past year. She plays the Vicereine to a far greater extent than her predecessors and, I should say, in a useful way. She visits community centres, hospitals, schools and so on (I have been encouraging her to take an interest in the Belfast Meanscoil from which I regret to say the Department of Education has discouraged her). She is a theology graduate, a lay reader in her local Anglican Church in Kent, a high church ecumenist and an active participant in religious debate. In pursuing these interests, she has struck up a friendship with Fr Gerry Reynolds of Clonard which, although she does not come across as very political, may hold some benefit. She told me at dinner that she had felt obliged to turn down an invitation to lecture on the Virgin at Clonard (she has a special interest but thought displaying it might get her husband into too much trouble). She had, however, attended a novena that morning at Clonard and taken communion. I encouraged her interest, suggesting that the bigots needed to be faced up to, mentioning the efforts of the evangelical movement ECONI with which she was familiar, and the attendance of Hughie Smith as Lord Mayor at Clonard, the first time he had ever been in a Catholic Church. I had heard he had been deeply moved by a standing ovation.

Yours Sincerely,



Declan O'Donovan
Joint Secretary

PS: I understand from Martin Williams (6 pm) that McGuinness has asked Ancram for a meeting tomorrow at which he will be accompanied by one person. The agenda was not specified but is assumed to be about the impasse created last week. Ancram has accepted. As it happens, Williams and I will be at Hillsborough this evening for one of our regular dinners with the Secretary of State at which these matters may be pursued.