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MR. P. TEAHAN
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Informal Ministerial Meeting, 28 May 1996

Summary Report

Ambs L + W

RCW
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Decommissioning/Opening Scenario

1. The Secretary of State acknowledged that during his press conference the previous week he had inadvertently misrepresented the position of the Irish Government by stating that it was our view that decommissioning "should not" occur until the end of the negotiations - he ought to have said "cannot".
2. He said that the British Government was not looking for a commitment to a firm timetable for parallel decommissioning irrespective of the character of the negotiations, which they accepted had to be meaningful and comprehensive. Rather, it took the view that during a process of negotiations of that type it would be necessary that there be some decommissioning.
3. The British Government, and the Unionists, felt that so far all the movement on the issue had come from their side. Michael Ancram felt that while Trimble was very suspicious of what he saw as salami-slicing tactics, and felt that not enough pressure was being placed on Sinn Féin to move, he might be deliverable if he felt Sinn Fein would compromise. He had been more flexible publicly than he had to be.
4. The Secretary of State repeated that a "contingent commitment" to engage in some decommissioning during negotiations of the appropriate dynamism and seriousness could be envisaged. Michael Ancram, referring to the remit for the decommissioning sub-committee proposed by the Taoiseach, felt that "consider an approach under which some decommissioning would take place during the process

of all-party negotiations..." was perhaps too open-ended.

5. The Tánaiste stressed the acute difficulties faced by Sinn Féin in persuading the IRA to consider decommissioning any weapons before a political settlement. Secretary O hUiginn emphasised the importance of sticking to the language of Mitchell. He drew attention to the implications of Mitchell's recommendation that decommissioning must be mutual; this required both the IRA and the loyalists to be prepared to act in tandem and for both to feel that political progress of a type satisfactory to them was being made. Secretary Dalton pointed out that decommissioning was a concrete act, whereas assessing political progress was more nebulous. Who would make that assessment?

6. The Secretary of State imagined that at the opening plenary the chair would ask all parties to demonstrate their good intent to carry forward the Mitchell compromise, leading to some decommissioning in the context of negotiations of the appropriate character. If he judged this exercise to have been satisfactorily completed, the matter would be remitted to the sub-committee. After a period - in September? - the chair of that committee would report back to the plenary. At the same time the plenary itself would consider the overall progress of the political negotiations. This process could be repeated at intervals.

7. Secretary O hUiginn felt that the sub-committee would have to be asked to consider the Mitchell report as a whole. The terms of reference ought not to be selective. The Secretary of State said that any terms of reference would have to include specific mention of the Mitchell compromise, viz. some decommissioning in the course of the negotiations.

8. The Tánaiste underscored the need for a clear exit strategy from the opening plenary. Sir John Chilcot suggested that it might be for the chair to decide, with the agreement of the two Governments and the acquiescence of the main participants. He might be required to consult the parties before reaching a decision.

9. The Irish side indicated that, while further work at official level was evidently required, what had been sketched by the British side seemed to offer scope for further consideration. The British undertook to prepare a paper along the lines discussed.

Chairmanship

10. The Tánaiste made clear our continuing strong preference for Mitchell as chair of the Plenary and of the Strand 2 negotiations, with De Chastelain playing the lead role on decommissioning after the completion of the initial address. We also felt that a role should be envisaged for Holkeri, possibly on human rights issues - which ran across the Strands.

11. The Secretary of State expressed reservations about Holkeri's suitability, for linguistic reasons. He and his officials continued in the view that while Mitchell should chair the plenary session, and the opening stages of work on decommissioning, de Chastelain could chair Strand 2. It was variously argued (a) that the real work in Strand 2 would be done bilaterally, as in 1992, and that what was required was simply a "ring-holder", (b) that to have the same person handling Strand 2 and decommissioning would suggest too explicit a linkage between the political and decommissioning streams and (c) that to have too heavy a US involvement would be politically difficult (the Prime Minister's difficulty with the

idea was mentioned in passing).

12. The Irish side pointed out in reply that it would be illogical to place a military man in charge of political matters, and vice versa and that under the British scenario de Chastelain would in fact become much more prominent than Mitchell, assuming the plenary only met occasionally. We raised the possibility of a panel of the three International Body members, with Mitchell as its head but with scope for flexibility and substitutions as required. The British side seemed to indicate a certain openness to this possibility, without commitment. They wondered if we could see Holkeri as chairman of Strand 2. The Secretary of State suggested that in view of the time factor it would be courteous formally to advise Mitchell that the two Governments would hope to involve him in the negotiations.

Other Matters

13. An Irish paper on the agenda for the negotiations was handed over. It was indicated that a further paper, in response to the British draft on procedural guidelines, would be ready soon.
14. It was agreed that the Liaison Group would meet in London on Friday next, 31 May, and that Ministers would again meet informally in London early on Tuesday 4 June, in advance of the start of the President's official visit.

Rory Montgomery

28 May 1996