



# An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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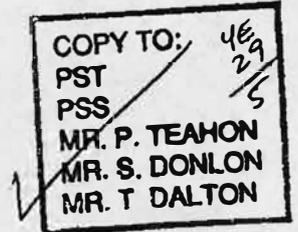
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29 May 1996

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To: HQ  
For: Second Secretary O hUiginn

From: Belfast  
From: Joint Secretary



Subj: Review of informal Ministerial meeting

1. John Chilcot indicated in a phone conversation this morning that the British side regarded yesterday's meeting as positive and encouraging. Peter Bell has made similar comments and has asked us to accept that the meeting demonstrated, "if not a climb-down" by British Ministers, at least some movement towards us on the key difficulties.
2. On the "Mitchell compromise" issue, Bell provided the following background to the formulation read out by the Secretary of State.

The compromise language suggested by Quentin Thomas last Friday was re-worked by Michael Ancram and forwarded to the Secretary of State, who "scribbled on it" over the weekend and consulted with others (who would have included Cabinet and back-bench colleagues). The net effect of his "scribblings" was to toughen up the language in a Unionist direction.

The text, as I noted it down yesterday, read approximately as follows:

"The Chairman of the Plenary would ask all participants to give an indication of good intent to carry through the process of implementing the 'Mitchell compromise' - in the context of meaningful and inclusive talks and with the purpose of building trust - and leading through to some decommissioning taking place during the negotiations".

The Secretary of State wanted the explicit reference to "implementation" of the Mitchell compromise. He held that, if the envisaged commitment was to be softened by being placed within the context of a meaningful talks process, sceptical colleagues would need reassurance that there was no change in the British Government's

determination to see the Mitchell compromise implemented.

An element which did not emerge clearly in the Secretary of State's presentation yesterday, but which is apparently present (or implicit) in the text from which he read, is that it would be for the Chairman (i.e. Mitchell) to characterise his own compromise.

3. I made the general comment that, while the broad thrust of the British proposal yesterday is helpful, we will need to see the precise terms which are envisaged. We will wish to ensure, for example, that it is the Mitchell report as a whole which is carried forward and not solely the suggestion in relation to parallel decommissioning. Other aspects such as the phrase "leading through" will need careful attention.
4. Bell emphasised the Secretary of State's generally nervous frame of mind at present, reflected in "desperate" efforts prior to yesterday's meeting (in phone-calls from the British Embassy) to get clearance from the Prime Minister for the approach which he was about to suggest. In the event, he could not get through. He went ahead regardless - but on the basis, as you will recall, that anything he put forward would be ad referendum to the Prime Minister.

Sir Patrick had two particular anxieties yesterday. One was that the content of any text handed over to us might be reflected in press briefings after the meeting and that this would cause him enormous problems in the Cabinet, on the back-benches and with the Unionists. He could not afford these while the election campaign was still in progress. Accordingly, he merely read from a piece of paper which he had in front of him. He would, however, hope to give a full text to us very shortly. Bell's expectation is that, bearing Prime Ministerial approval, this might be tabled at Friday's meeting of the Liaison Group (when the election is out of the way).

A more general fear on Sir Patrick's part, which he signalled at the outset of the meeting yesterday, was that the Unionists would claim that a "secret deal" had been agreed with us and would try to exploit this for electoral purposes. I remarked to Bell that, despite the carefully neutral terms used by both Ministers in public following the meeting, the possibility of Unionist abuses of this kind had still to be reckoned with. I noted grumbles about intensive meetings between the two Governments in David Trimble's article in today's Irish Times.

5. On the Secretary of State's suggestion that the Chairman might report back to the Plenary in, say, September on the progress being made on decommissioning, I reiterated the importance of progress being demonstrated in both tracks. Our analysis is that it will be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to secure any progress on decommissioning in the absence of measurable political progress. Any report to Plenary would have to embrace both aspects.

I also underlined the primacy of the judgements reached on both points by the Chairman (rather than the Plenary, as John Chilcot seemed to envisage yesterday).

Finally, I contrasted the Secretary of State's suggestion of a report to Plenary by September with suggestions from Michael Ancram and his officials (reflected in the most recent British draft of the agenda) that the opening Plenary session might be extended over many weeks. Bell said that he himself would like to see the transition from the Plenary to the substantive negotiations as quickly as possible. Like us, he favours a short Plenary (and understands why we remodelled the British draft agenda to achieve this). September would seem to him to be a sensible target date for the envisaged report back to Plenary.

6. I commented that the Secretary of State would have been under no illusion yesterday about the importance attached by the Tánaiste to a clear "exit strategy" permitting a prompt transition from the Plenary to substantive political negotiations on the basis of a judgement reached by the Chairman.

Bell felt that this point was well taken and that there is very little between the two Governments on this. His Ministers essentially recognise that the Chairman must play this role - but in such a way as to carry the parties with him. The Secretary of State, he noted, did not object yesterday when John Chilcot agreed with us that the decision on the transition must be taken by the Chairman of the Plenary, with the agreement of the two Governments and the acquiescence of the parties.

7. As regards the chairmanships, Bell underlined the vehemence of the Prime Minister's view that to have Senator Mitchell chairing Strand Two as well as the Plenary would be "too much Mitchell" (because of the international mediation implications). The Secretary of State regards the Senator as ideally equipped to take on the delicate assignments envisaged for him in the Plenary. He also recognises the strength of the

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practical arguments we have put for a Strand Two involvement for him. However, given the various political sensitivities about a comprehensive role for a high-profile American, he feels that the Strand Two aspect can only be resolved at Head of Government level.

Bell speculated that the combination which the Prime Minister would like to see would be Mitchell in the Plenary and possibly the Business Committee and De Chastelain in Strand Two.

As regards Holkeri, the Secretary of State may well suggest a human rights involvement on the lines we suggested yesterday. Bell says that there has been no criticism of Holkeri within the British system, and people have a genuinely open mind about him, but that doubts persist about his linguistic skills. According to Michael Ancram, Senator Mitchell himself voiced such doubts during their recent conversation in Washington.

I reinforced the case which we made yesterday for a comprehensive involvement of Senator Mitchell, with flexibility in his deployment of deputies, and the significant presentational difficulties which would arise were the Strand Two chairmanship to be given to one of the deputies rather than to the Senator himself.

8. In conclusion, Bell said that the paper on the draft agenda which we handed over yesterday is regarded as a very helpful contribution. I have signalled our hope that we can hand over our procedural guidelines paper later.