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Meeting between Tánaiste and Secretary of State

Castle Buildings, 20 October 1996

1. The Tánaiste met the Secretary of State for a working lunch at Castle Buildings yesterday. He was accompanied by the Minister for Justice, the Attorney General, Sean O hUiginn, Wally Kirwan, Val O'Donnell and the undersigned. The Secretary of State was accompanied by Michael Ancram, Sir David Fell, Quentin Thomas, Peter Bell, Jonathan Stephens and Ken Lindsay.
2. The Secretary of State noted that the Lisburn bombs represented an unwelcome and potent new factor since his last meeting with the Tánaiste. The gut feeling on the British side was that it would be impossible to say yes to an IRA ceasefire which was restored in the immediate aftermath of Lisburn - or, indeed, of a successor attack, which the British judged to be on the cards. He confirmed that the British Government wanted to see a ceasefire and wanted to see Sinn Féin at the talks. In the new circumstances, however, the two Governments would need to clear their minds on what would constitute an "unequivocal" restoration of the ceasefire. He quoted approvingly in the context from a passage of the Tánaiste's recent Seanad speech.
3. The Tánaiste confirmed that the Irish Government also wished to see the ceasefire restored and Sinn Féin at the talks. We recognised that Lisburn had caused substantial damage and had set new scales of fear. It had also demonstrated the IRA's continuing paramilitary capacity and the urgency, accordingly, of achieving a restoration of the ceasefire. We neither wished to lower, nor to raise, the hurdles in the way of Sinn Féin entry to the talks.

He sought clarification of the British thinking. Were they proposing a time-gap of some kind? Did they intend a specific ban on certain activities (such as targeting or punishment beatings) during that period? A lengthy time-gap would, in our view, be very unwise. Bearing in mind the acute internal pressures within the Republican movement which a time-gap could be expected to produce, only a very short period would realistically be sustainable. If the British Government were to indicate to Sinn Féin that there would be a "sanitising" period of, say, three months, Sinn Féin would not be able to hold that.

The key question was how to create the conditions which would get Sinn Féin in without driving others from the room.

4. The Secretary of State said that the British Government judged three months to be a short period, particularly given the temper of "our own people" following Lisburn.

The Minister for Justice warned of the risks of a three-month period. In particular, there would be serious difficulties if Sinn Féin were to be told that, when they entered the talks at the end of the period, they would have to accept a range of agreements reached among the other participants in the interim (on matters such as decommissioning). Such an interpretation of the Mitchell Report could not be defended.

5. The Secretary of State returned to the meaning of an "unequivocal" restoration, commenting that Bruce Morrison had been quite right to interpret this recently as "dependable". The mood in Britain had changed profoundly in the aftermath of Lisburn (but also of Canary Wharf and Manchester, which he had visited over the weekend). The British Government needed some means of satisfying itself and others that a restored IRA ceasefire would be genuine.

Agreeing with the Tánaiste that Lisburn enhanced the urgency of such a ceasefire, he said that, if a ceasefire could be inculcated through some form of words, the British Government would wish to explore this. Everything had been made more difficult, however, by the Lisburn bombs. They would need to express the idea that actions or inactions (the latter no less important than the former) would have to match verbal commitments given. It was not a matter of people necessarily meeting preconditions or passing tests, but rather of behaving in a way which was not inconsistent with the words used. Anything less than three months, in the British Government's view, would fail to meet the needs of practical politics at the present time (with people challenging Sinn Féin's claims to be democrats in the light of Lisburn).

6. Ancram said British Ministers were being asked why any declared restoration of a ceasefire should be taken as real, given that the Lisburn base had been deliberately targeted to maximise deaths and injuries. It might be that a mixture of words and actions or inactions would be required. But, to keep public opinion with them, the British Government would have to be able to answer this question.
7. The Tánaiste said he had no difficulty in understanding the background against which the British Government had to operate. However, the greater the period of time envisaged for Republican inaction, the greater would be the internal pressures on Gerry Adams and his colleagues. This would probably be their last opportunity to achieve a ceasefire. The two Governments had to have a process which could deliver this second, and almost certainly final, ceasefire.

The Secretary of State remarked that another way of making the same point was that this would be the last IRA ceasefire which would be credible.

8. The Minister for Justice observed that any agreement which might be reached on a possible sanitising period would have to take into account the possibility of a further "spectacular".
9. O hUiginn pointed out that all the conditions set by the two Governments for the admission of Sinn Féin to talks (e.g. in last February's communique) had been defined

against a background of IRA violence, not of peace. It was important to acknowledge this.

One possible interpretation of recent events was that they represented a "last throw" on the part of some of the IRA leadership, who now widely appreciated the limits and downsides of violence, but were prisoners of their own almost fatalistic mindsets and doctrines. It had ^{to} be assumed that there would be a reflex terrorist instinct to "play hard ball" whenever people were likely to assume they were not able to do so, however stupid the tactic.

He suggested that a very small window of opportunity existed for a fresh ceasefire. The Irish Government accepted that an IRA atrocity on one day followed by the declaration of a ceasefire a day later was highly problematic. He cautioned, however, against efforts at this stage to redefine the conditions already set - in conditions of violence it should be remembered - for entry into negotiations.

There were essentially two decisions left for the Republican movement: either to go back once and for all into a peaceful situation or to go back and then to leave and return to violence. (In this sense, the reality effectively reduced the relevance of the earlier argument about "permanence").

The British Government would either have to say that it could handle a ceasefire politically or acknowledge that it could not. The proposal for a new three-month period sanitation was effectively a statement of the latter kind, given the certain inability of the Republican leadership to deliver on it. If this was the case, it was better to say so plainly and openly.

A three-month test was massively unrealistic and could not be sustained by those whom we were encouraging to bring about a ceasefire. It was also an unrealistic scenario in terms of the dynamics of the talks which would take place in that situation; the reality would be that the proposed rendez-vous with Sinn Féin would eclipse the other elements in the Talks agenda, and it was certain nothing would be achieved in that time in the talks process.

10. The Secretary of State referred again approvingly to the Tanaiste's recent Seanad speech. He suggested that it would be for Republicans to satisfy the two Governments, as the Taoiseach had also recognised in a speech some months ago, that the ceasefire they were offering was a genuine ceasefire. Inferring that a period of some description would be acceptable to the Irish Government, he asked what this might be.

The Tanaiste said that the bottom line would be how long the Sinn Fein leadership could sustain matters. Our estimate was that maybe 70% wished to come into the peace process while 30% did not. Against this background of massive internal pressure on them, Adams and his colleagues could not sustain a three-month limbo period.

11. The Minister for Justice reiterated that, if a period of some kind was to be agreed, there would have to be an understanding between the two Governments and the talks participants about what could or could not be achieved during that period. Unionists would have to be disabused of any idea that matters could be settled in the interval before Sinn Féin arrived and that the latter's agreement to these would be a precondition for their participation in substantive talks.

Ancram observed that, under the sufficient consensus rule, no agreements could be reached without the SDLP anyway. Thomas suggested that the Unionists would oppose a "treading water" approach. He remarked that the three months would not impose a total quarantine on Sinn Féin, who would presumably have contact with the two Governments at official level.

- Note 12. The Tánaiste emphasised that a fortnight or three weeks was the maximum period which Sinn Féin could sustain. Realistically, there would be demands for meetings with the Irish Government within days of a restored ceasefire.

13. O hUiginn observed that on this issue the British Government and Sinn Féin were the protagonists and the Irish Government's role could be compared to that of a Greek chorus at the corner of the stage. We could promote understandings of the relevant positions, or point to openings for progress, but we had no illusion we could manage directly the relationship between the two protagonists, or negotiate with the British a time-frame we could guarantee would work. The question was whether a basis existed for a deal between the present British Government and the present Sinn Féin leadership on something which could be presented as an "unequivocal" restoration of the IRA ceasefire. In his view, such a deal was there to be achieved on highly realistic terms. If it could not be achieved, there was a serious risk of a free-fall situation, which would almost certainly draw in the Loyalist paramilitaries also.

- Note 14. In response to a question from Fell, the Tánaiste said the indications we had were that the internal debate in the Republican movement was maturing to a point where those in Sinn Féin who favoured a ceasefire were going to make a push for it. There were, however, also indications that a rump were opposed (the 70/30 breakdown which he had earlier mentioned could well be revised to 60/40).

The Secretary of State asked how, given that the Lisburn base had been attacked with the authority of the Army Council, there could be certainty that there would be no further violence of this kind.

The Tánaiste replied that no guarantees of this kind could be given. The real worry, he commented, was that the Lisburn attack had seemed a relatively simple operation for the IRA. It was likely that, damaged by the London raids, Clonastee etc, they had wanted to prove a point about their capacity.

15. The Secretary of State mentioned strong feelings at last Thursday's meeting of the Cabinet sub-committee on Northern Ireland, some of whose members would endorse Unionist unhappiness about successive shifts in the British Government's position on

decommissioning. While he and the Prime Minister still had the upper hand, it was becoming very much harder.

The Tánaiste suggested that the views of members other than the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State could not be given as much weight as those of the latter, who had the best grasp of the realities.

Ancram said that, in the Commons debate following Canary Wharf, it had been "touch and go" whether the Government would be able to win support for continuing to seek Sinn Féin involvement in the talks. There had been a definite sea-change in British public attitudes over recent months.

The Minister for Justice pointed out that there could be no sensible alternative to a policy which held out the promise of avoiding a return to the last twenty-five years of IRA violence. She also remarked that, as far as the Irish Cabinet was concerned, Ministerial colleagues placed their faith in the judgments of those Ministers concerned with Northern Ireland policy.

16. The Secretary of State again asked what period the Irish Government might envisage (between one day and three months).

The Tánaiste indicated his willingness to look at this but hinted at the essentially doubtful nature of such a process.

O hUiginn said that, if a short period meant the difference between, say, the UUP staying or going, it would be worth seeing whether one could be agreed. He noted, however, that anything beyond a very short period would imply that in real terms nothing was going to happen during the remainder of the present Parliament. He also underlined the importance of presentation in relation to any period agreed; both sides would have to be able to present the period as having some validity in their own terms.

17. The Secretary of State commented that, if Sinn Féin could not wear anything of this kind, this initiative could be taken no further. He reiterated that the British Government could not be seen to be employing at face value the words used at the time of the August 1994 ceasefire.

Asked by the Minister for Justice to set out his own thinking, he said that the British Government had in mind the absence of anything inconsistent with an intention to turn away from violence for political ends.

The Minister noted the problems which e.g. a renegade robbery during this period might cause.

18. The Secretary of State returned to the approach proposed by the Taoiseach some time ago, i.e., that it was for the Republicans to find the words, and to demonstrate the

behaviour, needed to satisfy the two Governments. He saw this as a wiser approach than that of trying to devise particular rules of conduct.

Asked by the Minister how the judgement would be reached, he observed that he was himself statutorily obliged to issue an invitation if he considered that the agreed conditions had been met. Obviously, the two Governments would wish to stay together on this. They must therefore decide together what constituted a "unequivocal" restoration.

He was not sure whether British public opinion would weather, say, a two-month period.

19. O hUiginn commented that we regarded any time out essentially as space for the Secretary of State to handle British Government difficulties with the Conservative Party and the Unionists. We did not see it, as the Secretary of State seemed to imply, as establishing the principle of a sanitation period, and therefore leaving only the length of such a period as the only matter to be agreed. Our hope would be to achieve a renewed ceasefire which would block a spiralling of violence on both sides and would link up in the longer perspective with the last one, thus consolidating the habit of peace.

Asked by Ancram to clarify his earlier comments on the role of the Irish Government in this area, Sinn Féin, he explained that the Irish Government could not provide the British Government with sufficient reassurances about Sinn Féin or vice versa. While we would of course not stand back from the efforts to achieve a ceasefire, the key relationship in that particular respect was that between the British Government and Republicans. We had always to be realistic about the limits of our own role and not engage in negotiations where we could not deliver.

20. This part of the discussion concluded with a comment by Ancram that evidence, for example, of people testing mortars during the period (as happened last year) would be inconsistent with a genuine ceasefire.
21. Turning to a review of prospects for the decommissioning debate at the talks, the Secretary of State made clear that the British Government wished to get out of the current impasse.

The Minister for Justice remarked that a point would have to be reached sooner or later at which we would move on from the decommissioning item, whether or not everything was settled. The two Governments must be firm in their resolve to move on - for the sake of the talks and of public expectations about them.

22. Ancram noted that the Chairman did not propose to time-limit the three points under this item (something which, in better political circumstances, might have been achieved through the Business Committee).

There was a general stock-taking on the intentions of the various delegations in relation to interventions. Ancram indicated the British Government's intention to hold back until these had all been completed.

There was a inconclusive exchange of views on the length of time which item 2(b) might require.

23. Asked by O hUiginn about David Trimble's thinking on an "exit strategy" from this debate, Ancram said there had been no contact since the UUP conference. He suggested that Lisburn had hardened the position of both the UUP and the Loyalist parties.
24. The Secretary of State suggested that the central issue was whether or not Trimble was a "closet McCartney" and wished to destroy the talks. He did not think that this was the case, whatever his reservations about the UUP leader. He believed that Trimble wished the talks to succeed and that he would, accordingly, be quite happy to "park" the decommissioning issue, in which he saw significant political risks. He would, however, want clarity in relation to the terms for Sinn Féin's entry to talks and to the meaning of "unequivocal". Stephens added that Trimble was open to "parking" only on the basis of Sinn Féin not being there at that point.
25. The Secretary of State recommended a substantial statement by the Irish Government on decommissioning when the time came (in order to allay Unionist suspicions).
26. Asked by Fell whether a resolution of how decommissioning would be handled would be crucial to the prospects for a ceasefire, O hUiginn replied that there was an intimate connection, as decommissioning had been one of the major inhibitions and a key factor in the collapse of the ceasefire. Sinn Féin would find themselves in severe difficulties if they were to enter a process which they could not sustain (with e.g. the prospect of David Trimble showing them a "red card" very shortly after arrival).
27. The Minister for Justice suggested that the question of access to Ministers during the period might be a dimension which the Sinn Féin leadership could usefully develop for the purpose of reassuring their supporters. The failure to sustain a second ceasefire would probably leave them permanently in conflict.
28. The Tánaiste suggested that it would be useful to explore all of these issues further over the next few days.

As the Plenary was due to resume at 2.30pm, the meeting concluded at this point.

David Donoghue
22 October 1996