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SECRET

Meeting with Sinn Féin

1. Mr. Tim Dalton and the undersigned met Mr. Gerry Adams and Ms. Lucilita Bhreathnach for a little over an hour on 25th October.
2. We began with the most emphatic possible message that the credibility of the process was now hanging by a thread, and that it was our firm conviction that any further atrocity would make it irretrievable.
3. Mr. Adams expressed the growing concern in Sinn Féin at the delay in a British response to Mr. Hume's approach. This had been greatly increased by some recent British statements, in particular Major's statement in the House of Commons that "words would not be enough". He emphasised the difficulty the Sinn Féin leadership had had in bringing people to the point where they accepted that a ceasefire would be reinstated in return for that language. The language was eminently reasonable. If a ceasefire had been on offer for that two years earlier, people would have scarcely credited it. He heard what we were saying about the vulnerability of the process to further operations. He felt the delay increased the risk in that respect.
4. He enquired about the British response to the text. We said we had anticipated certain points of difficulty from our knowledge of standing British positions, but we had not engaged in a textual negotiation with them as such. Mr. Adams emphasised very strongly that if that text was agreed, the IRA would have "no option" but to abide by their commitments and to declare a ceasefire.

5. We explained the cumulative impact that successive atrocities or attempted atrocities had in limiting the room for manoeuvre of the British Government. We had taken firm positions with them, but found they were both cautious because they anticipated further attacks, and sceptical that the text would actually deliver what was promised.

6. We gave the Sinn Féin side a brief summary of the exploration on the British side of a three month delay between a ceasefire and Sinn Féin admission to the talks. Mr. Adams was absolutely categorical that he could not sell that, that it would be seen simply as a refusal of the offer of a ceasefire on reasonable terms, and that if a text emerged with that in it, he "might as well take a sabbatical".

7. We said that while the concerns behind the three month suggestion were undoubtedly real, we felt there could be a tactical element in the British presentation. We explained that the two Governments were looking more constructively at the notion of a calendar for the talks as a whole. He considered that would be a positive element.

8. We said that while we had left the British in no doubt as to the likely result of the three month approach, it was for consideration on the Sinn Féin side whether some relatively short interval might not be accepted on a pragmatic basis. If such an interval meant the difference between the unionists staying in the talks and walking away, then we should explore whether it was possible. It could be presented in relatively positive terms everyone could accept, e.g. Sinn Féin updating themselves on developments in the talks to date (this last suggestion occasioned some sarcastic hilarity).

9. Mr. Adams said that from a negotiating position he would have to say that no change whatever in the terms set out could be tolerable. On the other hand, if there were practical reasons for a very short interval, e.g. meetings with the Government, Senator Mitchell, etc., that would be tolerable. He stressed he was however thinking in terms of days. There could be no presentation of any interval as a "sin bin" or testing period. The essential test would be that after a ceasefire parties were seen to be treated equally, including Sinn Féin. He added in this context that he had just been in telephone contact with Mr. Tony Lake, who felt that the gap problem would be resolved between the two Governments.

10. We said that the British Government now seemed to be thinking of publishing a text within the next seven days or so, as they were concerned that the situation might leak out. Mr. Adams agreed generally on the need for urgency, since the longer the interval, the greater the risk of things going wrong. He stressed very strongly that the text as it stands would be certain to achieve its purpose. On the other hand, for the British to proceed with a text without knowing that it would meet the intended purpose would be totally counter-productive and give the wrong signal. He underlined the importance of the text being presented in terms of an agreed scenario: Major would have reassurances that it would have the intended effect more or less immediately. There could be confidence-building exchanges, e.g. through John Hume, which would also give reassurances on the terms of any P. O'Neill statement. We mentioned in that regard that the terms of any such statement would be important, and also stressed the value of other possible assurances. Mr. Adams made clear that they accepted the need to sign up to the Mitchell Principles straight away.

11. We stressed again at this point the fear, even expectation, on the British side of further attacks which would, in our considered view, make the process irretrievable. Mr. Adams countered with assurances on the deliverability of what was being promised, and the urgency of those who doubted it "calling the bluff" of the IRA on this issue, if that's what they felt it was.

12. There was some discussion on how work on the text might be advanced. Mr. Adams thought Mr. Hume's meeting with the Prime Minister on Tuesday next would be a key point. He stressed again the urgency of working speedily on it and the need to keep in touch with official channels.

Sean Ó hUiginn

29 October 1996