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Meeting with Sinn Féin Representatives

8 November 1996

1. Mr. Teahon, Mr. Dalton and Mr. O hUiginn met Mr. Gerry Adams and Mr. Martin McGuinness of Sinn Féin in Dundalk for about three hours on 8th November 1996.
2. Mr. Teahon set out in detail the background of his contacts with the British Government. He described the latest position as regards the proposed draft article. Mr. Dalton emphasised the difficulties facing the British Government, and the need for a realistic approach.
3. Mr. Teahon said that while we would convey to the British Government any points that Sinn Féin might wish us to convey, the British Government was very unlikely to "sign off" on the article until they had some comfort as to what would be forthcoming in terms of a ceasefire statement from "P. O'Neill".
4. Mr. Adams said he could not go to the IRA before he was clear on the British response on their paper. He stressed that this initiative to restore the ceasefire had come from him personally. There had been an inordinate British delay in responding to the draft submitted by Hume, even allowing for the disruption caused by IRA operations. Sinn Féin needed to be in the talks on the same basis as everyone else and with "business as usual in the talks". It was necessary to reassure the IRA

that we can deliver proper talks, even if there were certain flaws in the process related to decommissioning, etc. The impression they had was the British were seeking simply to assert "the legitimacy of the six county state". The Sinn Féin position was governed by two separate considerations: Sinn Féin asserted the rights of those who voted for their party. At the same time Sinn Féin recognised that talks could best take place against a peaceful background.

5. As to a "P. O'Neill statement", Mr. Adams said there were three different wordplays under discussion about ending the conflict through negotiations. He said that anything relating to the "intention of the present leadership" was "not a runner". He speculated around a second approach recognising the notion that negotiations could "provide the basis for lasting peace". He stressed that the present Sinn Féin leadership would find it difficult to go back to conflict after another ceasefire, even if they wanted to, so the problem of their commitment to a permanent end to conflict was more apparent than real. To ask that P. O'Neill should refer to "intention" was to guarantee that an IRA convention would be called for the wrong purpose. He objected strongly to the phrase "assuming that there is a clear intention not to resume the conflict" on page 2 of the proposed article. Mr. O hUiginn explained the thinking behind the "scenario paragraph", and emphasised again the need for Mr. Major to have some degree of comfort on the presentational level. Mr. Adams objected that there should have been consultation before taking that step.
6. The meeting then discussed the desiderata for a "P.O'Neill" draft.

7. The Official side stressed the need to give the British side, and indeed the Irish Government also, comfort on this point. The kernel of any statement would indeed be an unequivocal restoration of the ceasefire, but the concomitant language and packaging could make all the difference between a positive impact of the statement and the fullest possible momentum, or, on the other hand, hesitancy and controversy about the real scope and nature of a new ceasefire.
  
8. Mr. Adams stressed the worry about further IRA operations. Matters were fairly urgent. It was very important for the British to give a positive signal, which would help to steady matters in Republican ranks. Sinn Féin need clarity on the British statement. The British now wanted more on the "P. O'Neill" statement. He stressed the limits on what could be delivered
  
9. Mr. Teahon stressed the effort which had had to be made by the Irish Government to prevent premature publication of the article, or its publication in the wrong terms. Mr. O hUiginn said that in spite of many contacts with John Hume, etc., the Irish Government still had no clear sense of the possible outline of a "P. O'Neill" statement. We had hopes that the original sentence proposed by Mr. Hume, to the effect that it would be the intention in taking the decision to end armed conflict for ever, had not survived. An alternative which had been mentioned informally by Mr. Hume seemed to relate all the reassurance by the IRA to a situation after a negotiated settlement. That did not really meet the current needs, since the concerns relating to IRA activities focussed more on the here and now and on the run up to such a settlement.

10. Mr. O hUiginn asked whether Sinn Féin could work on the lines “it would be our wish and intention that this decision will mark the beginning of a process ensuring (or consolidating ?) the end of armed conflict on the island for good”. He said the reference to “process” could include the various steps (convention, etc.) which the IRA might maintain had to be part of their internal processes for this goal, and therefore no procedural requirement was preempted.
11. The Sinn Féin side questioned the notion that they had to give comfort on the “P. O’Neill” draft before the British signed off on theirs. Mr. McGuinness recalled that at the last ceasefire the IRA had gone out front. Mr. Adams repeated his view that an IRA convention would be called if they used the word “permanent”.
12. Reverting to the British text, Mr. Adams felt that Sinn Féin was being dealt with in a special way. The Government side explained that Dr. Paisley and Mr. McCartney had also had to subscribe to the Mitchell Principles, in conditions which were very difficult for them, as a climbdown after threatened walk-out.
13. Mr. Adams said the British article was of key importance to the IRA “to lubricate and to show British commitment”. He recalled a television interview by David Goodall who had spoken of the responsibility of civil servants to find words to give an impression of movement. His general point was that the British would not go beyond the terms they had agreed to, and would exploit all loopholes in those terms. He stressed also the need for confidence-building measures.

14. Mr. Adams gave a preliminary critique of the British text. He flagged two particular problems:
- (a) A reference to “assuming that there is a clear intention not to resume the conflict”. (Page 2)
  - (b) A problem of the timetable, which was far too vague in terms of Governmental commitment.

At the end of a discussion on this point he seemed to accept that his concern would be met by having the Governments “propose and encourage” the adoption of a timetable, as opposed to simply “encourage”.

15. He then asked Martin McGuinness to talk about what he characterised as his “hobby horse”, namely decommissioning.
16. Mr. McGuinness recalled the Sinn Féin position on decommissioning. He had predicted some time ago that on decommissioning the British would hand the baton over to the unionists, and that was what seemed to be happening.
17. Mr. O hUiginn explained the current situation in the talks. The British seemed genuine in seeing the implementation of all aspects of the Mitchell Report as the way forward. They had helpfully used the verb “to consider” in the draft of the article. Under the rule of sufficient consensus, they did not procedurally have the capacity to force the

unionists to move off this agenda. On the other hand, once it became clear that decommissioning was not fulfilling a blocking role in terms of keeping Sinn Féin out of the talks, there might be a more sensible perspective on it. As it was, the unionists were approaching a point when they would either have to accept an exit from their precondition on this, or agree to break the talks on it.

18. Mr. Adams urged strongly that the language on decommissioning should reflect Mr. Major's commitment, given in the *Irish Times* article, that it should be taken forward without blocking the negotiations. The present text was far weaker than that.
  
19. After some further discussion on the current state of the talks, including the future involvement of Senator Mitchell, and the possible role of General de Chastelain in a verification committee, the Sinn Féin side restated their requirements of
  - No preconditions.
  
  - Agreed timeframe.
  
  - Confidence-building measures.

They stressed they would need to know the steps which would be taken in the event of an unequivocal ceasefire and particularly concrete matters such as CBMs. Prisoners and a reference to the Irish language were mentioned specifically.

20. The Government side again stressed the need for the British side to have some comfort on the P. O'Neill statement. Mr. Adams objected that he had been told by Hume, the Irish Government and others that an unequivocal restoration of the IRA ceasefire was the key requirement. There could be "useful grace notes", such as the IRA accepting negotiations as "the means to end conflict" and saying "this is our desire". The Irish side, while acknowledging that the unequivocal restoration of a ceasefire was of course the key issue, nevertheless stressed the importance of setting this decision in a context which enabled everyone to make the best of the new opportunity.
21. At the end of the meeting the Sinn Féin side undertook to set out in writing for the Irish Government the difficulties they saw with the present British text. Mr. Adams seemed to envisage also that Sinn Féin would come back with a clearer picture of the likely "P. O'Neill" draft.

Sean Ó hUiginn

11 November 1996