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Meeting with Sinn Féin

15 November 1996

Present were:

Official Side: Mr. Paddy Teahon, Mr. Tim Dalton, Mr. Sean O
hUiginn

Sinn Féin: Mr. Martin McGuinness, Mr. Aidan McAteer, Ms. Rita
O'Hare.

1. At the outset Mr. Teahon summarised the existing position as we saw it. Sinn Féin were not negotiating with the Irish Government. We were rather seeking to facilitate an agreement between them and the British Government. The key to that seemed to be Prime Minister Major's position. We felt he wanted to do business. We were bothered by other currents in the British administration, in particular some positions adopted by Sir Patrick Mayhew. Given the danger of the process unravelling, speed was of the essence. We needed to reinforce the positive currents within the British system.
2. Mr. Teahon recalled the points which Sinn Féin had brought up at the last meeting in relation to the British draft. We felt there were points we could go back on to the British with some hope of success (proposed

timescale, cultural reference to the Irish language, a reference to ground rules 8 and 9 as a test, rather than the existing language of the draft).

3. On decommissioning Mr. Teahon said the British Government and Sinn Féin were manifestly at different ends of the spectrum. We had persuaded the British Government, with great difficulty, to move closer to the middle in their text ("to consider etc."). Mr. Teahon stressed the British concern around the *intentions* behind a renewed ceasefire. They needed comfort on that. It was also an area of the utmost concern to the Irish Government. Any suggestion or doubt that a ceasefire was short term would put us in totally unacceptable territory.

4. Mr. McGuinness recalled consistent assertions by the Irish Government and John Hume that Mr. Major did want to move forward and was genuine in his approach. Sinn Féin wanted to believe that and to be part of the process. However, the experience of the British Government over the last two years was directly contrary to that. He accepted realistically that there would be different currents within a large administration, but having observed the British Government over the last two years, Sinn Féin supporters were now much less convinced of British good will than they were in 1994. This was particularly so in relation to decommissioning.

5. Mr. McGuinness said they were deeply appreciative of the work of the Irish Government and accepted they were not negotiating with that Government. Their concern was that the British seemed to be ensuring further land mines down the road. They felt all ambiguities in a text:

could be exploited by a British Government with malign intent. Their "October 10th position" had been reached with great difficulty. There was serious doubt if they brought about a restoration of the August 1994 position, that that would be enough to bring the British Government forward. He referred to a radio programme where Adrian Guelke (a South African lecturer in QUB) had said the British were essentially trying to settle the security dimension and neglecting the political. They were once again putting the cart before the horse.

6. Mr. O hUiginn said we were working very hard to persuade the British to move at their end. In the course of one such contact with Sir Patrick Mayhew, we had thrown out the possibility of a meeting between the British (at official level) and Sinn Féin. Somewhat to our surprise they seemed highly interested in our idea, and indicated it would be favourably considered provided the request came from Sinn Féin, or at least that the British themselves did not initiate it. He mentioned also that latest speculation in Washington was downplaying Senator Mitchell's chances for appointment as Secretary of State.
7. Mr. Teahon and Mr. Dalton stressed the need for urgent action, and suggested that the particular concern on the British side centred around the intention behind any renewed ceasefire.
8. Mr. O hUiginn stressed the need to understand Mr. Major's position. He was effectively already in an election campaign where Tory prospects were improving, however slightly. His party managers would regard the Irish issue as potentially dangerous in all forms. If he made a

further act of faith in the intentions of the Republican movement, and if there were further attacks, his credibility would be severely damaged. If he refused to engage with Sinn Féin, further attacks would simply convince the public that his negative stance was right all along. It was ironically the peace process option which left him most exposed in electoral terms, and for that reason his concern to have comfort on the intention behind the ceasefire was eminently understandable.

9. Mr. McGuinness said that if people saw that the British Government was capable of taking action independently of the unionists, that would be a "feel good" factor which would consolidate matters. The British Government needed to be the driving force. He felt Major would gain considerably from a new peace.
10. Mr. Teahon brought the discussion back to decommissioning, and the intention behind the ceasefire, as the points where reciprocal movement could be needed.
11. Mr. McGuinness recalled that his statement that "the ceasefire would hold in all circumstances" was now used everywhere. The British Government had shown no such interest in it when the ceasefire was actually holding. He recalled the various British attacks on himself and Gerry Adams, when they might reasonably have been trying to support what Sinn Féin were trying to achieve. Mr. Teahon stressed the political reality, that Major would not move without some comfort in relation to the actual terms of a ceasefire.

12. There followed some discussion on the current prospects in the negotiations. Mr. O hUiginn said that the Alliance Party, acting perhaps as a stalking horse, were advocating setting up the Verification Commission as of now, as the way out of the impasse. That could be looked at but only if one were certain that it would achieve the objective of decoupling decommissioning from politics. We would for our part stick to the Mitchell Report, and be very careful not to be ratcheted back to Washington 3.

13. Mr. McGuinness said that it would be difficult to get a ceasefire if there was no background of negotiations. The Republican movement was clear that the unionists would adopt a strategy of delay etc. The position of the British Government was the key in that respect. People asked despairingly whether the British Government would ever sponsor the necessary rights, parity of esteem, etc. Mr. O hUiginn said that there were changes in Northern Ireland society in the direction of greater equality, which would inevitably find political expression one way or the other. The depressing lesson of the talks was that some unionists actually seemed to want the violence, as it prevented political change and kept everything neatly in the old boxes. A peaceful, inclusive process opened the door for serious change and was threatening to them.

14. Mr. Dalton stressed the importance of seeking to get a process bedded down before the change of Government.

15. Mr. Teahon asked the direct question whether Sinn Féin wanted us to go back to the British Government with any comfort on the language of a

ceasefire statement. Mr. McGuinness said that the October 10 statement had been the bottom line for the Republican movement, and one which had been obtained with great difficulty. Decommissioning remained a major obstacle on the road. He repeated his appreciation of the efforts of the Irish Government. The Tánaiste's remarks had been "powerful from our point of view and strengthened us greatly" in attempting to move people to politics. There was however a massive gulf of distrust between the British and the Republican movement. He recalled that Peter Brooke was the only one with a good word to say for the Sinn Féin leadership in all the year and a half of the ceasefire. Mr. Teahan said we felt our most useful function was to give Sinn Féin a clear analysis of where matters stood. To go back on the details of the British text without some comfort on the other could be counter-productive and force the British system to the wrong conclusions.

16. Mr. McAteer said some clear sense was needed of what was achievable on the British document, and on whether or not the British were removing preconditions.
17. Mr. Teahan agreed that the Irish side could do a redraft of the British document, along the lines suggested, as our best estimate of what might be achievable.
18. Mr. Guinness endorsed Mr. Dalton's remark that a credible process was needed before a British general election. He said a redraft of the document on the lines suggested would be very helpful to them. He undertook that Sinn Féin would come back with a considered response

on the apparent offer of contacts at official level with the British Government. (He had earlier indicated that in his view, such contact might build confidence among the Republican community, who recalled that contacts had been intensive during the campaign prior to 1994.)

19. At the end of the meeting there was a brief exchange on prisons issues. Sinn Féin stressed the growing concern at the treatment of some Republican prisoners in Britain. They also expressed appreciation of the three transfers which had recently taken place.

Sean Ó hUiginn

15 November 1996