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PST, PSS, S/S Ó hUiginn,
Counsellors A-I, Section,
Messrs Teahon, Donlon &
Dalton, Ambassadors
London & Washington, Joint
Secretary

Liaison Committee, London, 21 March 1997 Summary Report

The meeting, which took place in the Oxford and Cambridge Club (the NIO is currently preparing to move from the old Admiralty Building to offices previously occupied by MI5 at Millbank), began at 11.30 and was followed by informal discussion over lunch. Present on the Irish side were Seán Ó hUiginn, Sean Donlon, Ted Barrington, David Donoghue, David Cooney, Paul Hickey and Simon Hare. The British side were represented by Quentin Thomas, Jonathan Stephens, Colin Budd, Peter Bell, David Watkins, David Hill and Donald Lamont.

It was provisionally agreed to meet again in Dublin on Wednesday 9 April.

Main points to emerge

Hume-Adams

The British side appeared to hint that the Secretary of State's reply to the questions posed by John Hume may not necessarily be the last word on the timing of Sinn Féin entry into the negotiations. Quoting from a transcript of the Prime Minister's recent telephone conversation with the Taoiseach, they suggested that an indication from the British Government that Sinn Féin could be expected to be invited to participate in the negotiations from 3 June, following an early IRA ceasefire and compliance in word and deed with the requirements of paragraphs 8 and 9 of the Ground Rules, might be forthcoming in response to a supplementary question from Hume. They indicated that reassurance on the timing of an IRA ceasefire would be a factor in determining the nature of the response to any such supplementary question. However, when probed on what their response would be to a direct question on the timing of Sinn Féin entry, they suggested that it would continue to be a "circular reference" with the timing of entry still ultimately dependent on actions on the ground.

The British side indicated that Ministers intended that the response to Hume's questions should be made public so as to avoid any imputation of secret deals or negotiation on the issue, although no date for publication had yet been decided. It was for this reason, and no other, that they had invited Hume to put his questions in writing. If Hume did not do this, it was possible that the statement would be published in the form of continuous prose.

We urged that nothing should be published unless it was clear that it would be helpful; to do otherwise could be counter-productive in terms of a ceasefire and could also damage John Hume. To this end, we pointed out that the Secretary of State's letter to Hume was less forthcoming on a number of points than the Prime Minister's statement of last November. The British side indicated that no meaning should be read into this and that the more positive interpretation could be assumed to apply, whichever of the two documents it appeared in.

The future of the negotiations

The British side, remarking that since the impasse on decommissioning was largely due to Unionist concerns of imminent Sinn Féin entry to the talks, suggested that consideration should be given to a scenario whereby if Sinn Féin had not entered the talks by the summer break, they would be excluded for a defined period from the negotiations which would then move forward without them with a view to reaching agreement by May 1998.

We pointed to the dangers of imposing a “**time-lock**” on the negotiations as this would deny a substantial portion of the nationalist community the right to representation at the negotiations and would, perhaps for the first time, mean that the Governments were failing to offer the republican movement a meaningful alternative to political violence. Moreover, the “package” of elections, forum, decommissioning, etc., included many elements reluctantly accepted by nationalists to balance unionist concerns at the inclusivity of the process. Nationalists would look askance at a deal which formally excluded the “inclusivity” option while retaining all the features supposed to balance it.

In relation to unionist concerns regarding the possibility of Sinn Féin suddenly entering the negotiations, we pointed out that there was little likelihood of Sinn Féin actually entering the negotiations immediately following a ceasefire. Some waiting period could be expected, following which Sinn Féin would have to enter the negotiations through a plenary session at which they would have to signal their attachment to the Mitchell principles. Any such a point of entry could usefully be expected to coincide with one of the periodic plenary sessions which the Governments envisage conducting regular reviews of progress in the negotiations as a whole.

As regards an **agreed timeframe**, the British side indicated a willingness to examine any proposals which we might bring forward. Informally, they indicated that May 1998, the date enshrined in British legislation for the winding up of the Forum, would appear to be a reasonable indicative target for completion, assuming a willingness on all sides to get down to serious business.

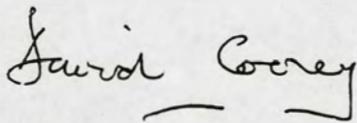
The British side invited us to elaborate on the thinking behind the Taoiseach's proposal that the Governments should begin preparatory work on **Strand Three**. We indicated that we saw potential in the intergovernmental nature of Strand Three, in that it offered the Governments the opportunity to engage the negotiations in substance if progress elsewhere proved elusive. We expressed doubt that consensus among the parties to the negotiations would emerge other than in response to the stimuli of initiatives taken by the two Governments. We agreed to refine our ideas on Strand Three and, eventually, to forward a paper to the British side.

On **decommissioning**, the British side offered some ideas on how unionist concerns might be overcome, none of which were new to us. These included the suggestion that the Chairman might determine the appropriate timing for the start to decommissioning and the proposal for periodic reviews at which Trimble, and indeed all parties, might have access to a “communication cord” if they were unhappy with the pace or direction of progress. We noted

that decommissioning was a matter which the Taoiseach had proposed for examination by officials and the British side agreed to our request to prepare a paper setting out their ideas in more detail.

Policy under a new British Government

The British side's revelations as to the likely intentions of a future Labour Government added little to impressions gained directly through our own channels. Emphasis was placed on the need to identify confidence building measures designed to compensate unionists for action on matters of concern to nationalists. While acknowledging the need to take account of unionist sensitivities, we argued that equality issues opposed by unionists (such as fair employment) were not appropriate for such compensatory concessions, and urged that nothing should be done to encourage unionists that their goals could be achieved outside, rather than inside, the negotiations. More fundamentally, we warned that the need for a new dispensation for Northern Ireland to replace the failed philosophy of majority domination in Northern Ireland could not be achieved by allowing the unionists to veto any process of change by the expedient of simply refusing any meaningful negotiating process.



David Cooney
24 March 1997

cc PST, PSS, Second Secretary,
Counsellors, Section, A-I,
Ambassadors London & Washington. Joint Secretary Belfast,
Messrs. Teahon. Donlon. Dalton.