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**MEETING AT THE WHITE HOUSE BETWEEN THE TAOISEACH,
THE TÁNAISTE AND THE NATIONAL SECURITY ADVISER,
17 DECEMBER 1996**

by Nolan
hvk
13.12.96

1. At the beginning of the meeting, the Taoiseach expressed the Government's deep appreciation to Tony Lake for his active and informed engagement in the Northern Ireland process over the last number of years.

2. In opening the discussion, Lake said that, while the present situation was not terribly encouraging, his firm position was that one should "never give up". He then asked the Taoiseach for his view on where matters stood.

3. The Taoiseach began by saying that our information was that the Sinn Féin leadership was now "in the driving seat with the IRA". As regards the process itself, the Republican movement was not prepared to go along with any proposal which had the colour of defeat about it. Likewise, they would see acceptance of any proposal, which did not include a specific date for their joining the talks, as reflecting weakness on their part. The Taoiseach believed their approach was wrong. If the IRA declared a ceasefire, Dublin and Washington would be in a position to exercise pressure on the British, and he believed that Sinn Féin would actually be in talks by the end of January.

Language of Ceasefire Declaration

4. At the meetings between Irish officials and Sinn Féin, the Taoiseach said that we had pressed the party hard to have the IRA agree to strong language in any ceasefire declaration. Language was very important. The Loyalist ceasefire, for instance, had

been quite convincing due to its containing helpful and forward-looking language, including an apology for past activities. While John Hume had indicated to us that he had secured agreement on helpful language, this unfortunately would have come from Sinn Féin and not from the IRA. In short, language could be very important in conveying to people that the political mind-set of the Republican movement had changed.

British Government position

5. Turning to the position of the British Government, the Taoiseach said that, as a result of the domestic political situation in Britain, he did not see John Major making any further move in present circumstances. However, if the IRA were to declare a ceasefire, the Taoiseach believed that the Prime Minister would let Sinn Féin join the talks. He added that it would be much better for Sinn Féin to opt into the process now, rather than to wait until after a British general election. In the latter context, there was a danger of the Tory party, then in opposition, lying in wait and declaring a "national sell-out" if moves to include Sinn Féin were made.
6. The Tánaiste agreed, saying that even if John Major wanted to move, he was not in a position to do so. However, if a ceasefire were declared, Sinn Féin would be on the moral high ground. The alternative was to be faced with the difficulty of fighting an election against a possible background of violence. He added that, as we saw recently, the IRA had the capacity to turn violence on and off.

How to take matters forward

7. Lake said he would "hate to give in, given the stakes were so high". It was simply unacceptable on ethical and substantive grounds to do so. But the problem was how

to take matters forward. The President would underline publicly to-day (i.e. in meeting the press, jointly with the Taoiseach and Tánaiste) the need for an unequivocal ceasefire, and he would at the same time refer to Sinn Féin's entry into talks, though without specifying a date for this.

8. Lake said it was not clear at present that the British, post a ceasefire, would facilitate Sinn Féin's entry into talks, though it would be logical for them to do so. This led him to ask if the Taoiseach had a basis for assuming that the right form of words in a ceasefire statement would deliver the British on this. In response, the Taoiseach said he had no evidence for such an assumption other than the belief that the dynamic for this outcome was strong. In addition, Major was not going to stay dependent on the Unionists for too long. Lake seemed to agree, adding that the British could politically turn the access issue into a success. He also made the point that, two or three weeks ago, all the body language from the British side was that they wished to deliver. However, London "wanted the IRA chicken before the British egg was laid".

9. Lake, significantly, then expressed a worry about continued US and Irish Government credibility with Sinn Féin in circumstances where, a ceasefire having been declared, the British did not allow the party into talks. Overall, however, the reality was that Adams knew he had no future outside a ceasefire. We should say to him, therefore, that we believed all the dynamics were in favour of his party being able to join the process once a ceasefire had been declared. A further incentive, which the Taoiseach alluded to, was the "political dynamic" that now existed, in advance of the British election, and which could give John Major the opportunity to set in stone (a positive) Tory policy on Sinn Féin participation in talks.

10. As regards the Sinn Féin demand for a specific date for their entry into talks, the Taoiseach said that the Irish Government had tried, to the point of unpleasantness, to move the British on this. The Tánaiste added that, if they agreed a specific date, the British would also be concerned that the Unionists would walk out. This led Lake to say that Trimble's position had been quite interesting, both on decommissioning and on the ceasefire requirements, during his recent discussions at the White House. He had in particular said that, if there was a commitment on the delivery of partial decommissioning, he could go along with the Mitchell approach. Secondly, if a ceasefire were genuine, he could envisage Sinn Féin joining the talks at an early date. Secretary MacKernan pointed out that, since the visit to Washington, there had been some back-sliding in the Trimble position. His party, to take but one example, had this week put forward a date (13 January) for the resumption of talks, in the knowledge that such an early date would not provide a credible period for the bona fides of a ceasefire to be established.

Worry about SDLP

11. The Taoiseach said that, once the election campaign got under way, the Unionists would have nothing to walk out on. However, one basic worry was that, if Sinn Féin were to do better in the election than the SDLP, it would be the former party that would have to do a deal with the Unionists. That was a potential and significant down-side of the present scenario, in particular if John Hume were to be replaced by Adams as the leader of the Nationalist community in the North.

Language of ceasefire

12. The discussion then turned back to the possible language of a ceasefire declaration, with Lake saying that he understood a reference to an "unequivocal ceasefire" would

not be enough. The Taoiseach again made the point that language was very important. For instance, if the IRA statement were to refer to outreach activities, such as the need for Republicans to develop a relationship with the Unionist community and to understand their Britishness, this would help convey that they wished to change their political mind-set. This would carry considerable weight.

13. The Taoiseach went on to say that, if a ceasefire were declared, we had to ensure that the decision on whether it was genuine was not left for determination by the British security services. The Tánaiste, in making the point that the Republican movement was obviously looking for new openings, said that in recent months they had asked Edward DeBono, (the lateral thinker) to organise some seminars for them.

Lake's suggested approach

14. Lake said that maybe the way to move forward was via criteria rather than through a specific form of words. He believed that, if the IRA declared a ceasefire, Washington "would be in a position to urge the British Government to do the right thing", and we should discuss this with the President at our meeting later. (He said he preferred to say "to urge" rather than "to put pressure on"). He added that, in a policy context, it would also make sense for Major to act positively. The Taoiseach agreed. He added that, if a ceasefire were declared, the healing process would be a long and slow one, as was made clear by the whole Drumcree situation and its aftermath. Lake, referring to the Bosnian analogy, said that people can love peace and, at the same time, still hate their neighbours.

Loyalist Ceasefires

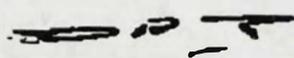
15. Asked how Washington could help maintain the Loyalist ceasefires, the Tánaiste

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suggested that the NSC should keep in touch with the Leadership, and also invite them to Washington from time to time. He saw the ceasefires holding as long as there was no upsurge of violence. The Loyalists did not want to go back to violence, and indeed were very stoical in holding the line on peace.

Attendance

16. At the meeting, which lasted about half an hour, Lake was accompanied by Nancy Soderberg and Mary Ann Peters from the NSC, and by Ambassador Jean Kennedy Smith. The Taoiseach and Tánaiste were accompanied by Secretary MacKernan and Ambassador Gallagher. The session with Lake was followed immediately by a meeting with the President, on which Pat Hennessy is reporting separately.



Dermot Gallagher
Ambassador

17 December 1996