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Meeting with Sinn Féin representatives
25th November 1996

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Mr Teahon
Mr Dalton
Ple
27/11

Present were:

Official side: Mr. P. Teahon, Mr. T. Dalton, Mr. S. O hUiginn

Sinn Féin side: Mr. Martin McGuinness, Mr. Aidan McAteer, Ms. Lucilita Bhreathnach.

1. Mr. McGuinness confirmed that Sinn Féin had already received the latest British draft through Mr. Hume. He said the paper had overtaken Sinn Féin's earlier hopes to improve the previous British draft. Key Sinn Féin personnel would meet in the next day or two for a considered and in-depth examination of the document. Those who had seen it so far were completely agreed that it made depressing reading. Sinn Féin had been endeavouring to establish clarity about the response to a ceasefire situation. This document was quite ambiguous, and clearly "raised the bar" compared to earlier British positions, not to speak of the text of October 10th. It seemed clear the British were looking for a victory from a ceasefire situation. He repeated that while Sinn Féin would seek to be fair to any positive aspect of the document, on the whole it was "very depressing", and the envisaged "process" was not saleable.
2. Mr. Teahon summarised the official view of the document. He pointed out that in some respects the British had sought to be forthcoming, for example in relation to contacts with Sinn Féin after the unequivocal restoration of the

ceasefire. He accepted however that there was a downside. The consideration of when the process was “successfully completed” clearly left too much at risk, in particular if the unionist parties became part of that judgement.

3. Mr. Teahon went over our most recent contacts with the British Government. They had made much play of the fact that we had not been able to give them comfort on the terms of any IRA ceasefire statement. That remained an important dimension to be looked at. The Irish side had already conveyed to the British the assessment that the present text would not work for Sinn Féin. We had undertaken to discuss the matter further with Sinn Féin. Prime Minister Major was the key player. One could try to approach the problem in two ways, or in some combination of both: to seek to give comfort to Prime Minister Major in terms of a statement (permanence, consent, parallel decommissioning), or to work on the present paper, to see how to accommodate his concerns, but to eliminate the bits that were unacceptable for Sinn Féin.
4. Mr. McGuinness enquired about the proposal for a direct meeting with the British. Mr. O hUiginn said that this was still under consideration, and the British had indicated they would take a decision when they heard the Sinn Féin response to the present document.
5. Mr. Dalton said the British had a dual objective: to get Sinn Féin into talks after a ceasefire, and to protect the talks process itself against the contingency of a unionist walkout. He summarised the Sinn Féin requirements as parity of treatment, a certain date, and no preconditions apart from the ceasefire. The talks would have a natural break at Christmas, as they had had in the summer. That could be used creatively to give some space, but on terms

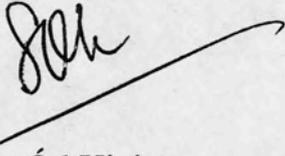
which did not reflect in any way on Sinn Féin, and would be equal treatment with other participants.

6. Mr. McAteer said the key question was whether the British could be moved from the present position. The official side said that, the present draft was produced in the absence of comforting "P. O'Neill" language. There was therefore an implication that the prospect of better language would enable us to revisit the situation. However, it was stressed there was no firm British commitment to that effect. The official side strongly urged Sinn Féin to think of a package, creatively framed around a Christmas break which could last possible towards the end of January, and which effectively would seek a British commitment that Sinn Féin would be at the talks at their resumption at that point (assuming the ceasefire commitment had been properly respected) in return for a clear ceasefire statement, couched in terms likely to be politically helpful to Prime Minister Major and the Irish Government.
7. Mr. McGuinness repeated the preliminary assessment by Sinn Féin of the British document. It clearly "raised the bar" in relation to their involvement and was uncertain and ambiguous on that point. The use of the word "process" was worrying - there was a clear impression that it would be a lengthy process. The negative attitude of Trimble and Paisley was unsettling for the Republican movement. The decommissioning precondition was still intact. Republicans feared the British were merely handing their vetoes over to be used by other parties.
8. Mr. O hUiginn said that while the decommissioning issue remained a difficult one, there was a limit to the extent it could be used by the unionist parties, unless they were prepared to break on it. Such a break might not carry entire conviction even within the unionist community. It was to be hoped that once

decommissioning lost its role as a blocking mechanism against Sinn Féin, there might be a more realistic attitude all round. It was necessary to be realistic about what could be achieved between this and a British general election. It would be a good result if an inclusive process could be bedded down in that interval, hopefully to come to fruition under the next British Government. There were inevitably going to be angry confrontations between unionists and Sinn Féin in the early days. The interval could be used to get over that. He said the British had questioned very persistently whether an IRA ceasefire could hold in the relatively difficult circumstances which could be realistically expected for the talks between this and a British general election. We had said to them that we believed the Republican leadership was realistic on that score. Mr. Dalton stressed the value of settling down the process under a Conservative administration, so that a future, probably Labour Government, could pick up the process without sniping from a possibly aggressive Tory party.

9. Mr. McGuinness asked about the US dimension. The Official side said that was a very important factor. It was to be hoped they could bring their influence to bear, firstly to avoid any precipitate publication of a "wrong" text, and secondly to encourage a realistic and achievable compromise to open the way for a ceasefire.
10. Mr. Teahon recapitulated the broad elements of a possible compromise, as we saw them, and stressed the need for urgent action within Sinn Féin to see whether they could rally to that compromise, and, hopefully, give us comfort on the language to be used in any ceasefire statement. Mr. McAteer indicated that Sinn Féin would continue to work on the issue. There was very strong agreement on all sides that it would be tragic and wrong not to pursue the prospect of a ceasefire to the utmost. It was agreed that Sinn Féin

would revert to the officials before or at the weekend, the precise time to be suggested later by Mr. McAteer.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Sean', with a long horizontal line extending to the right from the end of the signature.

Sean Ó hUiginn

27 November 1996