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Meeting between the Taoiseach and Prime Minister Blair,
Noordwijk -- 23 May, 1997

Present were:

Irish side: *The Taoiseach, Tánaiste, Mr. Paddy Teahon, Mr. Sean O hUiginn, Mr. Shane Kenny*

British side *Prime Minister Blair, Mr. John Holmes, Mr. Jonathan Powell, (Mr. Alastair Campbell was also present in the room)*

1. The meeting, which lasted about fifteen minutes, was informal in tone. The Taoiseach began by welcoming Mr. Blair's active engagement on Northern Ireland. The reports he had heard of the British meeting with Sinn Féin were positive. While he personally remained cautious, Sinn Féin nevertheless seemed to be making attempts to reduce their requirements to four specific points.
2. The Taoiseach summarised briefly his assessment of the four points at issue: He hoped there would be sufficient advance on confidence-building measures in relation to prisoners, etc., to meet that point. On decommissioning, Irish officials would work on a paper which essentially reaffirmed that taking things forward on the basis of the Mitchell Report was the only viable approach. The timeframe was to some extent already there in the British legislation. The question of Sinn Féin's entry remained a most difficult issue.

3. On this latter point, the Taoiseach accepted that some time would be necessary to establish that the Republicans complied with the ground rules. Sinn Féin wanted an indicative date. If they failed to fulfil the requirements of the ceasefire, then any promised date would no longer be operational. He urged consideration of a period of four weeks or less. He added that he was himself concerned that Sinn Féin had not fully educated their followers on what was needed, but urged the value of testing this to find out.

4. Prime Minister Blair said he was sorry if his initiative had taken Dublin by surprise. At the last meeting the British side had still been thinking matters through. He felt it had turned out "okay". He was personally keen to get Sinn Féin into Talks and to put them to the test. He had pointed out to the unionists that negotiation was not an easy option for Sinn Féin. If they failed to meet the test, then everybody would know where they stood. At that point he would be coming back to the Taoiseach and Mr. Hume urging that they draw the consequences and move on without Sinn Féin. He was anxious however to leave Sinn Féin with no vestige of excuse.

5. Mr. Blair said he was anxious to "crack on with the details". He was too short a period in office to be totally specific about these as yet. However, there seemed to be acceptance of some form of internal arrangement, and some form of North/South structures. He added in parenthesis that the East/West dimension was easier. No-one believed that a settlement would involve a united Ireland, although people could argue for that option. The sooner Sinn Féin were got in the better.

6. The Taoiseach expressed concern about the position of the SDLP, whose support seemed to be eaten away by Sinn Féin. It would be much harder if Sinn Féin were the dominant representative of the nationalist community.

7. Mr. Blair said he also worried about that. He felt he had needed to act quickly because of the situation on the ground. In his view, if people perceived Sinn Féin had a legitimate grievance, they would vote for them. If they were seen to be offered the hard choices, some support could go. He was anxious to keep faith with the SDLP and John Hume. However, as regards Sinn Féin and the Talks, he felt a heavy price could be paid by anyone who tried to wreck the Talks. He urged that the Governments should work closely together.

8. The Tánaiste asked the Prime Minister how he felt Mr. Trimble would react?

9. Mr. Blair said it was difficult for Trimble because he was still conscious of his extremes. However, he could see himself building alliances, and was interested in himself and John Hume cooperating as the engine of the process. That could leave the extremes out and build from the centre. Mr. Blair said that was why he himself had sought in his speech to reassure the unionists about where he was coming from.

10. The meeting concluded with a mention of East/West cooperation and agreement on the proposed draft report.

Sean Ó hUiginn

26 May 1997

File

Taoiseach's Call on the President

Briefing Points on Meeting with Prime Minister Blair

- Prime Minister's agreement to such an early meeting, a very positive aspect in itself
- Very good meeting - had the opportunity to raise a very comprehensive agenda of issues with the new Prime Minister
- Will be following up on these in due course
- Included proposals for enhanced East-West co-operation (including education, anti-crime measures, homelessness and the environment)
- Believe development of East/West co-operation in a visible way will improve prospects for ultimate agreement on a three-stranded settlement
- Obviously would not want it misconstrued as alternative to the development of the North/South axis - or indeed as a wooden horse for the development of this axis
- On Sinn Féin entry to talks, clear there is no change in the basic position - British want a credible ceasefire, deeds matching words and some time to check this. I had, in public comments, accentuated the positive i.e. door open if a credible ceasefire largely with the Sinn Féin/IRA audience in mind i.e. to help push them in right direction
- Clear they won't be present on 3 June; not sure about position thereafter; signs both ways
- Talks will recommence on 3 June; we will be there at Ministerial level; Blair needed some time to gauge situation but hope his Government will be ready to give impetus
- Continue to be worried about outlook on parades; we will continue to press that rule of law must be upheld
- Concerned about recent sectarian attacks.

S.H.