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Discussion between Prime Minister and Taoiseach

London, Thursday, 3 July, 1997

The Prime Minister opened by saying that a great deal of time, thought and energy were spent on Northern Ireland. He wished to move on the process with Sinn Fein and was prepared to do everything reasonable to that end. He reviewed the position on the four items raised by Sinn Fein. He expressed a concern that there was "a battle in the ranks" and that Sinn Fein might be stringing him along. He was content to wait "if we are going somewhere". In that context he was prepared to clarify points genuinely raised. He saw himself as being of a new generation prepared to deal rationally with the situation. The solution had to centre on a devolved assembly, the North/South dimension and the East/West relations. In his view David Trimble understands the necessity for North/South and John Hume understands the limits within which it can operate. He saw co-operation between the two Governments as critical. It was important that the two Governments did not allow others to "be wedged between them". He recognised that Sinn Fein were suspicious but had emphasised that he did "want them in".

The Taoiseach thanked the Prime Minister for his work to date. The Irish Government wanted better relations and did not "suffer from baggage". The Irish Government wanted the talks to move on. The Taoiseach said he had covered this at every opportunity including to the Republican movement. They in particular wanted an inclusive process since alienation was a disaster. The Republican communication method was strange to outsiders in that people had to sign up individually. The Taoiseach proposed that the letter to Quentin

Thomas should be replied to, not on a point by point basis but by giving the positives that had or would be acted on. The Taoiseach stressed the prisoners issue, in particular transfers and dealing with the small number of high security cases. On decommissioning, the essential problem was that if the Unionists blocked the negotiations at any point on the basis that no arms had been handed in then Sinn Fein were left in what they saw as an impossible situation. The Government's answer to the issue should stress that decommissioning had to be voluntary. The Taoiseach concluded by expressing his belief that on the basis of a constructive reply to the Sinn Fein letter the Republican movement would try to achieve an IRA ceasefire quickly.

The Prime Minister responded that he felt the prisoners issue was relatively easy to deal with. He believed decommissioning was the essence of what had to be dealt with. What was not acceptable to him was a situation where Sinn Fein, post an IRA ceasefire, said in the talks that there would be no decommissioning during those talks. This would not be in line with the Mitchell report and would be completely unacceptable to the Unionists. His understanding was that the Unionists would not block the negotiations in the review proposed provided that Sinn Fein were in the negotiations actively considering how to deal with the decommissioning issue.

The Taoiseach said that the Prime Minister had put the situation well. Sinn Fein knew precisely what was in the Mitchell report and had stated their commitment to engage in good faith on that basis. If there was an attempt to interpret the Mitchell report otherwise than in its precise wording then Sinn Fein would not find that acceptable. The Prime Minister repeated his earlier

comment on decommissioning without including the word considering and the Taoiseach in response stressed the precise wording of the Mitchell report.

The Taoiseach said that Sinn Fein in negotiations post an IRA ceasefire will have signed up to the six Mitchell principles. Decommissioning was separate to the principles and had to be on a voluntary basis. The decommissioning document had been agreed between the two Governments with an input from the Taoiseach prior to his coming to office. The Prime Minister repeated that it was unacceptable that Sinn Fein would discuss the Mitchell report if they had no intention of actually decommissioning. The Taoiseach interjected that some Loyalists would in fact adopt that position. The Prime Minister said the British Government were clearly of the view that there would be decommissioning in the course of the negotiations. The Prime Minister said that the Unionists' greatest fear was that Sinn Fein would get in the negotiations and if in their view there was not adequate progress towards a United Ireland, Sinn Fein would threaten violence. In that context the Unionists had problems with decommissioning being of a voluntary nature. The Prime Minister said his belief was that Adams and McGuinness do want to be normal politicians but he had concerns about their capacity to convince others of this.

The Taoiseach again underlined the importance of the six Mitchell principles in the negotiations. The decommissioning document was clear and was balanced.

The Prime Minister said that the two Governments will have to work around the document. If there was a difficulty in relation to decommissioning we should not be explicit in connection with it.

The Taoiseach said that even if the IRA were to contemplate a decommissioning gesture the position post any such gesture would still be problematic. The Taoiseach and the Prime Minister agreed that officials would consider appropriate wording for the reply to Sinn Fein and in that context the issue of a reply to David Trimble's letter.

[In the discussion at this point John Holmes underlined problems from a Unionist but not a Nationalist perspective]

The Prime Minister said that in relation to Drumcree the British Government had hoped that the Orange Order would not exercise the right to march. Orange Order representatives were taking issue with the Taoiseach's remarks in Belfast on Tuesday. The Prime Minister asked if the Taoiseach would be in a position to state on Drumcree that the decision was for the UK Government, that the Taoiseach had already made his position clear and that the situation was a particularly delicate one. The Taoiseach responded that from the Irish Government's viewpoint there could not be a march either up or down the Garvahy Road and that any consequences for later marches had to be closely watched. The Irish side had stressed the good work of the Secretary of State and did not wish to make her job any more difficult than it was. The Prime Minister said that he hoped whatever decision was made was respected and referred to "the basic rule of our law" in relation to marches. The Taoiseach responded that there should not be a repeat of the last two years. He said representatives of parties could sometimes be reasonable but the rank and file did not accept the resulting outcomes.

The Prime Minister said that when a decision was reached he would speak to the Taoiseach personally. The Taoiseach said he did not want a repeat of last year where the two Governments were at public odds with each other. The Prime Minister concluded by saying he still hoped the Orange Order would not exercise their right to march. This part of the discussion concluded with reference from the Taoiseach's side to Beaufort Dyke and British consideration of Bloody Sunday where the Prime Minister said the British side would look at the material given by the previous Irish Government and respond as quickly as possible.