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Reference Code: 2021/99/3

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PSM: PSMS PSSG:
Messrs. Murray, Teahon,
Mansergh & Dalton:
Ambassadors London &
Washington: Joint Secretary:
Counsellors A-I

Meeting between the Taoiseach and the British Prime Minister

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Luxembourg, 12 December 1997

1. The Taoiseach was accompanied by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr. Teahon, Dr. Mansergh, Mr. Lennon and the undersigned. The Prime Minister's team consisted of Mr. Holmes and Mr. Powell.

Sinn Féin visit to Downing Street

2. The Prime Minister said that he had a good meeting with Sinn Féin in Downing Street. He was clearly impressed by Gerry Adams' political and presentational skills. He would quite like to get to a position where he would be able to speak to Adams in a small setting as, in a wider context, it was difficult to be as frank as one would like.
3. The Prime Minister said he hoped very much that Sinn Féin were serious and that they meant it when they said they were committed to the peace process. He had asked them to confirm this and they had responded firmly and positively.
4. He had tried exploring with them what exactly they would accept as a final settlement, and whether they could sell this if it did not consist of "a united Ireland today". While this discussion seems not to have gone very far, Adams gave Blair the impression that, though it would be difficult, Sinn Féin could deliver.

Talks Process

5. The Prime Minister said he was sorry about the "flurry" over his proposal that a Heads of Agreement paper might be floated earlier in the week. (Note: this was something that the Secretary of State had raised with the Taoiseach and the Minister for Foreign Affairs at Belfast Airport and seemed to be an initiative by the Prime Minister which did not have the support of the NIO, designed to put new pace into the Talks. In fact, its timing would have been all wrong, as events in Belfast this week showed.) Mr. Blair went on to say that, at some point, the framework of an agreement would have to be put down on paper - we would have to get into detail or otherwise we would go nowhere. He felt that British and Irish thinking on the details of such a paper was not far apart. We should both reflect in the New Year on whether it was time to move ahead with such a paper. Mr. Blair also said that he was encouraged by our contacts with the UUP. He felt these were going well, and this was also the UUP view - he added that they would "not be backward in telling us if there was a problem".

Security situation / UUP

6. The Taoiseach expressed appreciation to the Prime Minister for briefing us on the Downing Street meeting. It was very useful that the meeting had taken place. He agreed with the Sinn Féin view that the ceasefire was very firm, and this was confirmed by our intelligence people. Adams and McGuinness had a firm handle on the situation, and it was only some third-rate people who were being picked up by other organisations.
7. The Taoiseach briefed the Prime Minister on his own visit to West Belfast on the previous Monday. He had a particularly useful meeting with Sinn Féin,

and this also gave people an opportunity of getting concerns off their chest. In turn, he was able to emphasise that there was more to life than destruction and it was now important to move forward politically. Adams and McGuinness were very pleased with the line he had taken.

8. As regards Trimble, we were doing our best to develop the relationship; we would give it our best shot. One difficulty at the moment was the line being taken by Ken Maginnis who was being very negative on the security situation. This did not accord with either our intelligence assessment, or that of the British. The reality was that the ceasefire was holding far stronger than the last time, and there was nothing to be particularly worried about.

Talks Process

9. Turning to the Heads of Agreement paper suggested by the Prime Minister, the Taoiseach said he was worried that, if we tried to float this at the wrong time, people might become concerned and start running in all kinds of directions. We needed to talk to the SDLP and Sinn Féin and would come back to the British at that stage with our thinking.
10. The Taoiseach agreed that in the New Year we should try and put some new pace into the Talks. We needed also to keep the process well clear of the marching season, when attitudes tended to become very hardline. A major problem was to get anyone to put anything on paper. In this regard, it might be helpful if we could get Sinn Féin and the Unionists talking to one another. The Prime Minister agreed and said he was encouraging Trimble in every way to engage with Sinn Féin.

Bloody Sunday

11. The Taoiseach asked when we could expect a British decision on Bloody Sunday, given that the Anniversary of the shootings was not far away. The Prime Minister said that his assessment was that a decision would be easier, in terms both of presentation and substance, if there was progress in the Talks. There was also the perception that concessions were going disproportionately to the nationalist community. The problem was, while London was doing plenty for the unionists, nationalists tended to get most of the publicity, as happened with the Downing Street meeting. The Prime Minister added, with a smile, that the phrase “moment of history”, referring to this meeting, was his own and not that of Gerry Adams, as had been widely reported.

12. The Prime Minister said he would try to do something on Bloody Sunday as soon as possible. However, he repeated that if there could be significant movement in the Talks in early January, this would make it easier. The Minister for Foreign Affairs said he was concerned that time might be running out, and pointed out that we had handed over our assessment of the new material on the shootings on the 24th June last. He urged the earliest possible response.

Roisin McAliskey

13. The Minister for Foreign Affairs briefed the Prime Minister on the up-to-date position on the Roisin McAliskey case. He said he had raised her case with the German Foreign Minister on humanitarian grounds, and he in turn had discussed it with his Justice colleague. While sympathetic, the German side felt it was a matter for the British courts. In the circumstances, the Minister

wondered whether there was some method whereby The Home Secretary could use his executive discretion in the case, given the humanitarian dimension. In saying this, the Minister said he did not wish to interfere in the judicial process. He added that he had a sense that, if the British could deal with the case on an executive basis, the German side might be quite happy.

14. In response, the Prime Minister said that any action on their part would have to be soundly based or otherwise they might be in difficulty. He believed that the Home Secretary had discretion in limited circumstances, but he needed to check the position out.

Prisoner Tariffs

15. The Taoiseach and the Minister for Foreign Affairs made a strong presentation on the setting of tariffs for the Balcombe Street Four in order to enable them to be considered for transfer to Ireland. Mr. Teahon expressed deep concern that a whole life tariff might be set in these cases, and referred to the situation in Northern Ireland where no prisoner had been kept in for such a long period. Dr. Mansergh emphasised that the deterioration in the prison regime for republican prisoners during Michael Howard's period as Home Secretary had seriously affected the last ceasefire. Mr. Gallagher argued for a reasonable tariff to be set. The men had served over twenty years in prison and, as Mr. Teahon had stated, no one convicted of analogous offences in Northern Ireland - such as the Shankill Butchers - was now in jail. He also made the point that, in two cases, the whole life tariff set for Republican prisoners had been overturned on appeal. The tariffs should in all the circumstances be set at a reasonable level.

16. The Prime Minister asked John Holmes to let him have a note on the situation and, in the light of this, he said he would see what could be done.

Policing

17. The Taoiseach said that he hoped the policing debate in the House of Commons at present wouldn't take away from the need to focus on the fundamentals of the issue. The SDLP had recently and very strongly emphasised to him how important RUC reform was to an overall settlement. There was no point in scratching at the surface of the issue. He was also worried about the related parades issue, given that the RUC was unacceptable in nationalist areas. He saw all this at first hand on his visit to Andersonstown on Monday, where the RUC could not even use their sirens.
18. The Prime Minister, referring to the more general issue of the level of the security presence on the ground, said that the British were constantly working on scaling this down. He couldn't "understand why we can't do more". He knew the CAC were there but, at the same time, "we should be able to do more". The Taoiseach acknowledged the efforts that had been made, including the Secretary of State's visit to see the towers in South Armagh. It was very important that this be maintained.
19. On the deeper issue, the Prime Minister confined himself to saying that only in the context of a long-term settlement would the RUC think of themselves as policemen.

North-South Structures

20. Mr. Teahon said that any new structures would have to include an all-Ireland body or Council with executive powers. This was crucial, and there was no way we could proceed without it. While John (Holmes) might take the view that Unionists would have a difficulty with this, it was fundamental for us.

21. The Prime Minister wondered if a Council for North-South Cooperation might meet the needs of the situation. Mr. Teahon strongly dissented. We could not in effect recognise Northern Ireland unless there was a body on the island with agencies beneath it. In this regard, he listed some illustrative areas, including a Marine Institute for the island, and gave a sense of how the Council would operate. Mr. Gallagher, as a further example, said a North-South Council, made up of Ministers of Tourism from both sides, might decide tourism promotion policy, which would then be implemented by an all-island tourism agency.

22. The Taoiseach said that Sinn Féin could not agree or afford to be boxed into a Northern Ireland context. He also emphasised that he couldn't get an agreement through his own party without substantial structures; in the context of our "touching the Constitution", people were already asking if North-South Bodies were real. Moreover, Adams and Hume would have to be able to say that such structures could develop over time.

23. Mr. Holmes said that the British did not have a problem with the Irish presentation, but that the Unionists would. He added that the problems were probably essentially presentational. He argued that Unionists would say that, if the two sides needed to meet on a North-South basis, this could happen.

Dr. Mansergh pointed out that this approach had been agreed in 1925, but that a meeting had never taken place!

Government of Ireland Act

24. The Taoiseach flagged that, in the context of balanced constitutional change, work needed to be done at an early stage on new language to replace that in Section 75 of the Government of Ireland Act.

Other Issues

25. The Taoiseach said he had asked the Minister for the Marine, arising from a discussion with the Secretary of State, to travel North to see if he could resolve problems on (a) the agricultural side relating to milk quotas along the border, and (b) in the fisheries area, related to the Hague quotas. Perhaps the Unionists were testing us to see if we were willing to help on these two issues.
26. The Taoiseach also mentioned his forthcoming meeting with President Clinton in Washington.

Conclusion

27. In concluding the meeting, Both Prime Ministers spoke warmly of their personal relationship, and the importance of this for the process.

Dermot Gallagher
Secretary
Anglo-Irish Division

17 December 1997