



An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

Reference Code: 2021/99/6

Creator(s): Department of the Taoiseach

Accession Conditions: Open

Copyright: National Archives, Ireland. May only be reproduced with the written permission of the Director of the National Archives.

*Mr Hume
draft at this stage
17. 1. 97*

25

Note of dinner with British officials, Government Buildings, Dublin, 16 January, 1997

1. Present on the British side were the British Ambassador, Veronica Sutherland and three top officials of the Northern Ireland Office, Sir John Chilcot, Permanent Secretary, Quention Thomas, Deputy Secretary and Jonathan Stephens, Political Director. On the Irish side were Paddy Teahon and Walter Kirwan, Secretary and Assistant Secretary, respectively in the Department of the Taoiseach, Tim Dalton, Secretary, Department of Justice and David Donoghue, Joint Secretary, Anglo-Irish Secretariat, Maryfield, Belfast. The visitors arrived at 7.30pm and the dinner concluded at about 10.40pm.
2. Chilcot and his colleagues made clear that, from John Hume, they were aware of further efforts he was making with Gerry Adams to find a basis for a restoration of the IRA ceasefire. They had seen language being put forward in this connection. They made clear, however, their strong view that attempts to secure revisions of the texts of 10 October or 28 November were not likely to offer a productive way forward. They indicated that Hume was meeting Secretary of State Mayhew that same evening. The latter would indicate their view on the type of approach but would also indicate that the British took some encouragement from some of the language that Adams seemed to be prepared to go along with. Reference was made to an indication of readiness to accept the procedures for the talks already agreed by the existing participants.
3. The British revealed continuing puzzlement as to why, and thus perhaps whether, the IRA would have been prepared to restore the ceasefire for a piece of prose with little novelty in it. They clearly considered that there was no element of 'phoney war' about the IRA's resumed campaign. They did not, however, dismiss interpretations of an internal struggle within the Republican movement between those inclined to politics and those bent on a military approach - although they did refer to the alternative reading that the movement was united behind an approach mixing tactically both political and military approaches.
4. Against this background, they did not completely exclude that it might be possible to have some restatement of British policy that would help move things towards a restoration of the ceasefire. If this were to be considered, it should, however, focus on a new agenda and not on attempts to amend earlier texts. They acknowledged that the Republican movement felt that they (the British) were not engaged - although they referred to all the evidence being to the contrary. Accepting that Republicans sought certainty as to entry to talks, they seemed to be prepared to give some positive consideration to approaches that would use the break around the British General Election as a way of giving assurance to Sinn Féin in this area. They made clear, however, that anything they might be able to say would retain some conditional aspects - as to deeds

before any speech could be made, or statement issued on their side, aimed at encouraging a restoration of the ceasefire, there would have to be 4-6 weeks' quiet from the Republican side. Stephens felt that sine qua nons for any project on these lines would be a complete halt to active military operations and something e.g. as regards the contents of a P O'Neill statement, coming from the Republican side.

5. Summing up on this aspect, Chilcot said that they were not saying that it was possible to do anything bearing on Sinn Féin entry before the British election but that a failed project before the election would be a worse option, as compared with keeping powder dry for a project that might have a better hope of success after the election. We should not underestimate the height of the hurdle of distrust that was now there. The Irish side were left with the impression that the British did not have much faith in any efforts on these lines before the election. In the course of the discussion, the British mentioned an indication they had from Hume that he was also talking to unspecified clergy about a totally new text (this may be a reference to long-standing work on a different text being undertaken by Fr Alex Reid). Also in the course of the discussion, the Irish side indicated the current Irish position in regard to the question of contacts with Sinn Féin.
6. The British side were at some pains to establish -which we confirmed- that the Irish side considered that the interests of the peace process required that there be in existence a talks process into which Sinn Féin could enter in the appropriate circumstances. From this, they drew the conclusion that, for peace reasons, as well as reasons inherent to the political talks process, there was a need to preserve the talks process. As they saw it, it was necessary to keep the talks going as long as possible, short of discrediting the process altogether. In discussion on this matter, note was taken of the potential risks to the Loyalist ceasefire if the talks process was seen to be at an end or broken down irreparably, in circumstances where fresh IRA violence occurred.
7. Thomas thought that the best way to keep the talks going up to the necessary point before the British election was to try genuinely to break the impasse around decommissioning. He referred to the recent further indication from David Trimble, to him and Ambassador Barrington, of a readiness to drop the UUP demands for a prior tranche of arms and for a prior schedule of parallel decommissioning if he were satisfied that both Governments were genuinely serious about requiring real, actual parallel decommissioning during the negotiations. While saying that he did not know whether this was bankable, against the background of Trimble's pattern of volatility, he advanced the familiar British argument about giving Trimble cover or camouflage for a retreat from the two points just mentioned, which the British continued to tell him were non-deliverable.

8. Thomas referred to a possible package, involving, on decommissioning, the type of architecture that has been under discussion between the SDLP and the UUP, the commitment envisaged under 2(b) of the agenda for the opening plenary, evidence as to the seriousness of the two Governments about actual parallel decommissioning (as, for example, through a declared readiness to impose sanctions on relevant participants who did not undertake parallel decommissioning; and a firm commitment to a fixed date to move into substantive negotiations in the three strands. The Irish side indicated that any such sanctions aspect would guarantee that those associated with the paramilitaries who have the arms would not be participating in the talks process. In addition, we put forward the familiar arguments for standing firm on the solid ground of the Mitchell Report and its sound and still fully applicable analysis of the issue.
9. While Thomas argued the case, one felt that Chilcot's heart was not in it. With both sides agreeing that even if the decommissioning impasse could not be resolved, it remained important to preserve the process by parking it judiciously, Chilcot referred to the idea of parking the talks at the appropriate moment; and arranging in advance that at that time, all the relevant actors, including the British Labour Party, would weigh in with positively oriented statements looking to the period beyond the British election. The Irish side responded positively to this idea of a managed set of statements at the time of parking. As to the attitude of Trimble and the UUP, the British felt that while they would wish to see progress on decommissioning before the election, they would not make the future of the talks, or agreement to parking them, dependent on such progress. It was noted on the Irish side that a managed set of statements might offer a framework in which it would be possible to construct a scenario offering some certainty to Republicans.
10. As to timing, Chilcot felt confident that the talks could be dragged out to mid-February. Reference was made to possibilities for the date of the British election over the span 20 March - 1 May. On the hypothesis of the earlier date, Chilcot appeared to think that one would not need to continue the talks beyond mid-February; and even in the case of the later date, he seemed to suggest that the talks need not be continued much beyond mid-February, for reasons connected with Easter and certain British parliamentary rules.



Walter Kirwan,
Assistant Secretary,
Department of the Taoiseach,
17 January, 1997.