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Meeting with Sinn Féin on Strands One and Two

Belfast, 28 May 1998

Summary Report

Ms by Coughlin
precis by

1. Tim O'Connor, Ray Bassett and Rory Montgomery last night met a Sinn Féin group (Bairbre de Brún, Aidan McAteer, Leo Green and, briefly, Alex Maskey) for a further discussion of preparations for the Assembly, and a first post-Agreement look at the North/South Ministerial Council and Implementation Bodies. Some other issues of concern were briefly touched on.
2. The general sense we took from the meeting was that Sinn Féin are, characteristically well-organised in its consideration of these issues, and that they are taking a broadly realistic and constructive line, in particular with reference to North/South matters.

Strand One

3. In general discussion, the Sinn Féin delegation expressed anxiety about the continuing controversy surrounding the formation of the shadow Executive, which they would wish to see created automatically and as quickly as possible after the election, with no linkage of any kind with decommissioning. While indicating that this was very much our position, we pointed out that - even leaving the decommissioning issue to one side - the Agreement is not explicit on the precise sequence and timing of the steps to be taken after the election of the Assembly, and that these ambiguities could create opportunities for those who wished to create difficulties for them.
4. Their other general concern was that the British could, in drawing up interim rules of procedure for the shadow Assembly, give the First and Deputy First Minister (likely to come from the UUP and SDLP) excessive powers vis-a-vis other members of the Executive Committee and Assembly, for example over the definition of Ministerial portfolios. They were also emphatic that parallel consent should run through the decision-making process at all levels. These anxieties reflect a general concern about the possibility of an SDLP/UUP "stich-up" and about British favouritism towards the UUP.

5. Among the specific points they made (some in response to questions we had previously put to them) were:

Location of Assembly: They remain strongly opposed to the use of Stormont either during the transitional period or afterwards, for reasons both of symbolism and of personal security. They noted that new buildings are proposed for the Scottish parliament and Welsh Assembly.

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new also*

Northern Ireland Departments: Acknowledging their lack of experience in dealing with the Civil Service, they indicated that they would be most appreciative of advice on the restructuring of Departments. As a general principle they would wish to mirror Southern structures as much as possible. However, they put forward a tentative list of ten possible Departments: Education; Arts, Heritage and Culture; Equality, Information and Community Relations; Environment and Transport; Housing and Local Government; Economic Development; Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry; Finance and personnel; Health and Social Security; Training and Employment.

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Civic Forum: Members should be appointed by the parties in proportion to their strengths, given the likely difficulty of reaching agreement on representative individuals: we commented that this approach was unlikely to be welcomed by major bodies such as ICTU or the CBI.

Interim Chair of Assembly: They suggested that the clerk of the Assembly, rather than a member, should act in this capacity pending the election of a permanent chair.

Operation of D'Hondt system: The First Minister and Deputy Minister should count against their parties' entitlement to the other places on the Executive Committee. They would reflect on whether, in the allocation of Committee chairs, the D'Hondt system should start afresh or whether it should carry on from the point reached in the distribution of Ministerial places.

Designation of issues for operation of parallel consent: All policy issues should be so designated.

Commitment to non-violence: The pledge of office was both explicit and sufficient.

Advisers/Programme Managers: There should be provision for the employment of expert advisers.

Strand Two

6. On North/South co-operation, the Sinn Féin group also admitted to a lack of experience and knowledge, and asked for our assistance, including with a private seminar they hope to organise for some of their members. They saw us as "taking the lead" in carrying forward this issue.
7. In general discussion on the areas which would be appropriate for early action, in particular through Implementation Bodies, they revealed an awareness of the need to strike a balance between political ambition, on the one hand, and short-term practical achievability on the other. They also agreed that the focus should not be placed exclusively on Implementation Bodies - although this would have to be the emphasis in the short-term because of the 31 October deadline: the development through the Council of habits of consultation and co-operation across the board would have at least an equal long-term impact. They recognised that in many instances harmonisation would be the rational way to proceed.
8. They outlined their initial thinking on areas which might be suitable for Implementation Bodies. Among the factors mentioned by them were visibility on the ground and a wide sectoral and geographic spread. They tentatively put forward the following: Tourism; EU Programmes; Irish language; Inward Investment; Trade promotion; Arts; Training and Employment.
9. We indicated that, with the exception of Inward Investment, where the large differences

Agreed

yes

included, more

between the investment packages on offer North and South was a serious difficulty, all of these were prominent in our thinking. We outlined the state of work on our own side, including the very preliminary thinking that had been done by the Departments of Foreign Affairs and the Taoiseach (reported in my note of 20 May). In subsequent discussion, Sinn Féin seemed to see greater merit in both the Community Development and the Environment options than they had initially.

10. In relation to institutional questions, they indicated a desire to see the earliest possible meeting of the Council in shadow form. As regards the Secretariat, they said that they would like to see some non-civil servants involved: we commented that this was very much a matter to be addressed on the Northern side. They saw the possible advantages of locating the Secretariat in Belfast, but were inclined to the view that, to avoid controversy, it should be separate from the new Intergovernmental Secretariat. ✓

Other Matters

11. Sinn Féin indicated that they were "laid-back" about the development of the British-Irish Council and that they would have no difficulty with an early meeting of the Council, so long as arrangements for the North/South Council were satisfactory, and so long as it was fully clear that the latter was not subordinate to the former. We strongly reassured them on this point. ✓
12. With regard to symbols and emblems, Sinn Féin suggested that it would be helpful to have from the British side a full listing of all relevant guidelines currently applying to the different categories of public building.

Rory Montgomery

29 May 1998