



An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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Steering Note

Government meeting with the SDLP

OVERVIEW

The meeting is being held at the request of the SDLP leadership, who are placing particular importance on it. There is a sense in the SDLP that they have been somewhat sidelined politically by the continuing row over decommissioning/establishment of the Shadow Executive. They view tomorrow's meeting, therefore, as part of a fight back to regain the initiative from the UUP and Sinn Féin, including the latter's domination of the media headlines in recent weeks. The core SDLP feeling is that the present impasse can only be resolved by the full and speedy implementation of the Agreement. Within that context, it becomes easier for parties to move on core issues.

The following are the key current issues:

Decommissioning/Shadow Executive

1. The present dispute over decommissioning/Shadow Executive is causing considerable difficulty for the SDLP. The party always feels uncomfortable and under pressure during disputes between the Unionists and Sinn Féin. There is also pressure arising from the view at nationalist constituency level that Trimble is trying to delay Sinn Féin's automatic right to participate in the Shadow Executive. To counter this pressure, Séamus Mallon has called on both Trimble and Adams to move. He has described the decommissioning issue as having the potential to become a running sore on the body politic of Northern Ireland and, at the same time, he has firmly and publicly rejected

Trimble's call for a meeting of the North/South Council before the formation of the Shadow Executive.

2. The reality at present is that Trimble and Adams have little or no room for manoeuvre. Trimble, unfortunately, has boxed himself into a progressively tighter corner on decommissioning, while Adams cannot deliver the IRA at this time on either actual decommissioning or a timetable for the process. We understand from the Prime Minister's meeting with Adams today that Mr. Blair has come to accept that the Sinn Féin Leader cannot move at this stage. The British and ourselves need, therefore, to think creatively and put decommissioning into a broader context and timeframe, while trying to give Trimble enough reassurance and comfort to move forward. John de Chastelain may hold much of the key on this, including taking on a possible guarantor role.
3. We have produced a short paper on a possible way out of the impasse (attached), and either this or a variation might do the trick. (Séamus Mallon and Gerry Adams already have the paper.) One helpful move might be if Trimble and Adams were to nominate a trusted colleague to work with the two Governments to agree a way forward, while keeping Séamus fully in the loop.
4. The Taoiseach and the Minister might pay tribute to the role of John Hume and to the on-going vital contribution he is making. His wisdom and analysis were at the heart of what brought us to this point.
5. The Taoiseach and Minister might also pay tribute to the restraint and political maturity that Séamus has shown throughout the present testing time. Mallon only publicly commented on the impasse after his private warnings had been ignored by Trimble, and in order to protect his constituency flank. (Internally, we need to be aware that Séamus is in something of a dark mood at present. He

has for some time been threatening privately to consider his position if things didn't improve quickly and, certainly, by the 31st October. He is now talking about a Christmas deadline. While this is probably largely "sounding off", he does need sensitive handling at the moment).

6. Adams is meeting Trimble tomorrow (Thursday) and is fully up to speed on our thinking. We have a Liaison Group meeting on Thursday afternoon with the British in Dublin.

North/South Council

7. The creation of strong North/South institutional structures has been central to the philosophy of the SDLP since its formation in 1970. In this regard, the party attaches the highest importance to the initial set of implementation bodies, which are to be identified and agreed by 31 October. We have had a series of meetings with the party to ensure full coordination of our positions, and they are fully up to speed on things at our end. They know also that the pace of North-South work at official level has been slow, due to the lack of a political mandate on the Northern side.
8. We have learned from the SDLP that the UUP has, disappointingly, adopted a very restricted approach to the implementation bodies. The UUP has proposed seven options, three of which would actually have responsibility for drawing more precise boundary lines between North and South (i.e. they would have as a mandate the drawing of maritime boundaries in Carlingford Lough, in Lough Foyle and in relation to the "frontiers for Territorial Seas"). The UUP list has now become public and was denounced by Seán Farren of the SDLP as "minimalist and contrary to the Spirit of the Agreement."

British-Irish Council

9. The SDLP and Government views in this area are very similar. Both of us accept the symbolic importance which Unionists place on the Council. We expect more detailed discussions with the British in the near future on the Council.

Implementation of the Agreement

10. We share the SDLP view on the need for the full and speedy implementation of all aspects of the Agreement.
11. The legislation implementing the Agreement (the Northern Ireland Bill) has now passed through the House of Commons and will be introduced into the Lords after the recess. The SDLP and ourselves have worked closely on the detail of the Bill, and the British have accepted many of our amendments. We will stay in the closest contact with the SDLP as the Bill is considered in the Lords.
12. We are pressing the British hard on all implementation fronts, and especially at present on security normalisation (or demilitarisation, to use the Sinn Féin word). Some progress has been made, and we expect the pace of this to be accelerated in the coming weeks. Substantial progress here could be very helpful in the wider context, including in relation to decommissioning.

Anglo-Irish Division

30 September 1998