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**Meeting with representatives of Sinn Féin in Government Buildings on
Friday 9th October, 1998 at 11.45 am**

Attendance

Taoiseach

Mr. Paddy Teahon, Department of the Taoiseach

Dr. Martin Mansergh, Department of the Taoiseach

Mr. Joe Lennon, Government Press Secretary

Mr. Tim O'Connor, Department of Foreign Affairs

Mr. Dermot Cole, Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform

Ms. Alma Ní Choigligh, Department of the Taoiseach

Sinn Féin Delegation

Mr. Martin McGuinness

Ms. Lucilita Bhreathnach

Mr. Aidan McAteer

Mr. Seán Crowe

Mr. Joe Reilly

The **Taoiseach** began by apologising for the delay in beginning the main meeting. This was because a prior meeting which had taken place between the Taoiseach and Mr. McGuinness had overrun.

The **Taoiseach** welcomed the Sinn Féin delegation and remarked that it was always good to keep in touch and to update on recent activities. The **Taoiseach** said that the main issue for him at the moment was timing. There was a need to input speed and momentum into the process. There was a sense of frustration at the lack of speed, and he was anxious to get on. It was not a question of assigning blame, and he understood that Sinn Féin was committed to honour the Agreement.

The **Taoiseach** then said that at their prior meeting, Mr. McGuinness had mentioned that he viewed decommissioning as a British issue, and that Sinn Féin's part had been accomplished by the decision in September to appoint Mr. McGuinness to liaise with General de Chastelain. There was a need to make progress on North/South ministerial bodies and to overcome obstacles and delays to the formation of the Executive.

The **Taoiseach** said that he had been telling Mr. McGuinness about the longer term consequences, that 31st October was not the last day in the world. The Taoiseach wanted to see progress before Christmas, and therefore, the month of November was going to be crucial, and he was committed to doing everything possible to move the situation forward. The **Taoiseach** mentioned that he had been in contact recently with David Trimble and with Tony Blair, and that Tony Blair, in particular, had shown a high level of commitment, focus and engagement with the key issues.

Mr. McGuinness began by thanking the Taoiseach for the dynamic involvement of the Irish Government on all levels. The next stage in the process was the establishment of the Executive. **Mr. McGuinness** mentioned that it would soon be six months since the Good Friday Agreement had been signed, and that progress must be made for the process to retain

credibility. Sinn Féin felt that questions were being asked, that Nationalists could see that the Assembly was in place, but that Strands Two and Three were still not visible. Nationalists wanted to see the involvement of the Irish Government that had been promised by the Agreement. Sinn Féin felt that decommissioning was an issue that had been raised by Unionists in an effort to prevent the implementation of the Agreement. Credit had been given by Sinn Féin to David Trimble for signing the Good Friday Agreement and visiting Buncrana and working with Séamus Mallon – Nationalists were prepared to seek out the good in his actions, but they felt despair at the flagging of decommissioning as the most important issue. Trimble's line in speeches to Party Conferences had presented problems for Sinn Féin.

Mr. McGuinness reported that he had met General de Chastelain on several occasions, and that there was a strong sense that the Independent Body was the way out of the present difficulties. De Chastelain knew that Sinn Féin were acting in good faith, and he must report to the Governments that this was so. The Governments must put pressure on Trimble to move. Sinn Féin felt that the British Government, in particular, could put pressure on Trimble to move, as it must recognise the change of mood in Northern Ireland. While the Nationalist community had always supported the Good Friday Agreement, the Unionist Community was now also seeing the benefits. **Mr. McGuinness** cited the example of a Unionist who had run as a 'no' candidate in the Omagh constituency, and who was now in frequent contact with rank and file Unionists, who were acknowledging the benefits of the Agreement.

Sinn Féin could not make any more moves, as it has done all that was possible in the traumatic movement of the past five years. Sinn Féin felt that Gerry Adams's statement, the decommissioning body announcement and their understanding of David Trimble's stance had been met with a begrudging response from David Trimble, and it was not enough even to allow them to enter the Executive, which was very disappointing. The kernel of Sinn Féin's position was therefore to allow De Chastelain to bring forward a positive report, outlining Sinn Féin's positive and constructive engagement with him, and that the British Government should afterwards put pressure on Trimble to establish the Executive. There was a fear that disillusionment might manifest itself in Northern Ireland if there were to be no movement this month, although Sinn Féin would do its utmost to keep everything on an even keel.

Mr. McGuinness remarked that the Good Friday Agreement was the most widely-read document of the year in Northern Ireland, and that he had seen it being read in pubs and snooker halls. Therefore, the people were very well-informed on the exact significance of each of the components of the Agreement. There was a feeling that 'This is a Peace Process not a Decommissioning Process', and there was a sense of horror that Unionists might scupper the entire Agreement over this single issue. Sinn Féin, he said, was very appreciative of the efforts of the Irish Government, along with Mo Mowlam and Séamus Mallon, to make clear that there was no interest in renegotiating, but it appeared that some Unionists wanted to do so, such as the 'Union First' Group established today.

The **Taoiseach** responded by mentioning that there was not one, but many stumbling blocks, and that it was necessary to be careful. If the De Chastelain Commission didn't work, that would be a very large problem, and if it did work, there was a need to be careful of how it worked. There were more possible obstacles after the formation of a Shadow Executive, such as the putting into operation of the North/South Ministerial Council, and the transfer of

powers when the Executive would move out of shadow status. It must be remembered that even if the first obstacle was overcome, the second could prove to be more pressurising.

Dr. Mansergh mentioned that he and Tim Dalton had recently met with General de Chastelain, and that they were convinced that the General was approaching the issue in a constructive way, and was keen to overcome obstacles. He remarked that General de Chastelain was neither a Presbyterian nor a Redemptorist preacher. Regarding dealing with the British, he said that Sinn Féin must note that their officials were inclined to set the mark too high at the opening round. Sinn Féin should trust that the British do want this to work. De Chastelain could persuade and convince the British to put pressure on the Unionists, but at the right time. Blair doesn't feel that he is yet at the stage where everyone is committed to moving ahead and meetings could take place on all levels. He said that David Trimble had made a good speech (without notes) at the recent Young Unionist conference.

Dr. Mansergh said that Sinn Féin must convey commitment and confidence in their ability to fulfil their part of the Agreement. The core theme must be that Sinn Féin is committed to the implementation of the Agreement, and there is a need to have it accepted that De Chastelain will look after decommissioning, and the process must move on.

Mr. McGuinness responded that this necessitated a focus from the British Government on what the Agreement meant, and that the process could not afford a British Government which would tolerate a Unionist party leader attempting to renegotiate. Sinn Féin felt that no credit had been given for their sacrifices in the Agreement. **Dr. Mansergh** said that there were flashes of recognition of this in Trimble's speech to the Young Unionists. **Mr. McGuinness** maintained that there was a campaign under way to renegotiate the Agreement. However, the evidence supported Sinn Féin's bona fides, and he felt that Sinn Féin had taken more risks than any other participant, even in recent times, with Adams's speech and the De Chastelain announcement, where they didn't have to move but they did, and all they got was a meeting with David Trimble. They got neither a seat on the Shadow Executive nor a meeting of the North/South Council.

Sinn Féin felt there was an expectation in the community for change, and if structures were not speedily up and running, the bona fides of Sinn Féin, the SDLP and the Irish Government would be called into question. The difficulty within Unionism had to do with accepting change, and not to do with decommissioning.

Dr. Mansergh pointed to Monday's editorial in the Belfast Telegraph as a hopeful sign. It said that decommissioning was an important issue, but it must not be allowed to undermine the Agreement.

Mr. Reilly returned to Dr. Mansergh's point that the British Government was not yet ready to put pressure on David Trimble, and asked why. **Dr. Mansergh** mentioned that the Unionist Conference date was a big issue. **Mr. McGuinness** agreed that what Trimble said at the Conference was indeed crucial, but that this delay was allowing him breathing space. **Ms. Bhreathnach** then made the point that Sinn Féin felt that Trimble was more secure in his party than he was admitting in public. There followed some discussion as to exactly how many defections were necessary before Mr. Trimble's position would be endangered.

Mr. McAteer said that the previous experience of Nationalist communities was that politics didn't work, and that their co-operation was now based on trust and faith, but that they needed evidence to show that this trust and faith was justified. The Assembly was sold to Sinn Féin people as a road to an All-Ireland Assembly, but now people were questioning what exactly Sinn Féin had got. The very visibility of the Assembly was causing difficulty as there was no counterbalance or visible aspect of Strands Two and Three. He said that the 31st would cause difficulty as the people had that date in their mind.

The **Taoiseach** agreed that the date was important, and that the process should not be held up by the argument on decommissioning. This aspect must be cleared up and concluded. It should be said that decommissioning was now being seriously engaged with by the Chief Negotiator of Sinn Féin and General de Chastelain, and that now we must get on with it. This was not a difference between the Government and Sinn Féin. The British Government and the Unionists must not be allowed to make use of any doubt concerning Sinn Féin's commitment.

Mr. McGuinness remarked that rank-and-file Unionists did not reflect the stances taken by their leaders, and that he was frequently told to 'keep up the good work' by Unionists that he met.

The **Taoiseach** said that there was good work going on on the ground in many organisations in the Republic in the context of twinning exercises on all levels. He cited his meeting with Councillors who had been meeting with their counterparts in Northern Ireland and who had reported to him that there was a feeling that great progress had been made. **Mr. McGuinness** mentioned an example of twinning involving fly-fishermen on both sides of the Border.

Mr. Lennon asked what feedback Unionists had from their grass-roots supporters. **Mr. McGuinness** described the Church groups and other organisations which were in contact with the Unionist parties, but felt that it was difficult to get a sense of where the Unionists stood in relation to their supporters because they kept themselves separate even in the Assembly. The **Taoiseach** said it was his sense that the Unionists were not as close to their support as the Nationalists. **Mr. Lennon** interjected that the only mandate that Mr. Trimble had was from the people on the ground.

Sinn Féin then raised some further points. **Mr McGuinness** asked what the latest situation was as regards to prisoners – whether there was any movement on releases from Portlaoise. **Mr. McGuinness** also asked about transfers of prisoners from the UK, and said that there were four prisoners whose transfers were outstanding, but that there had been, as yet, no meeting with Jack Straw in their regard. **Mr. Cole** explained that this was a question of scheduling for the two Ministers, who had not yet found a suitable time to meet. The **Taoiseach** agreed to follow up the situation.

Mr. McGuinness then raised the issue of the Policing Commission. There had been a report in the Sunday Business Post concerning a serving RUC inspector who was on the Commission, and Sinn Féin was extremely unhappy about this. **Mr. O'Connor** said that the official line was that he was acting as liaison with the RUC, and would not be involved in decision-making.

Mr. McGuinness then asked what the current situation was as regards the Justice Review. **Mr. Cole** said that a delegation of thirteen was due in Dublin next week to visit such places as the DPP's office and the AG's, as an information exercise. **Mr. McGuinness** asked if they were being pro-active in their approach, and **Mr. Cole** responded that they were looking at a very wide range of issues. **Mr. McAteer** said that the process must not be merely mechanistic or an academic exercise. Sinn Féin's attitude to the Justice Review would be the same as towards the Police Commission, and it must therefore take a historic look at the implementation of justice in Northern Ireland, and redress the harm that had been done in the past. There were political and technical sides to the argument, and it was therefore important that the Irish Government should work to ensure that the Justice Review was as wide-ranging as possible, and had the powers to redress imbalances.

Mr. McGuinness then asked about the progress of work on North/South Bodies. **Mr. O'Connor** said that there was near-agreement on what Bodies the Irish Government would aim for, and contacts with the British Government and the First and Deputy First Ministers were continuing. He explained that exploratory, technical meetings between Departments were due to begin next week. There was political but also technical work to be done, and a huge amount of work was going on. **Dr. Mansergh** remarked that Unionists were now engaging more seriously with the Bodies, which was great progress from their previous suggestions of a Body to demarcate the border in Lough Foyle. **Mr. McGuinness** said it was vitally important that the Bodies should be meaningful. The **Taoiseach** agreed, and said that it seemed that each Department here wanted a North/South Body of its own. **Mr. O'Connor** then reiterated that huge work was going on, and said that there would be a Government discussion on the matter on Tuesday.

Mr. McGuinness asked about Northern representation in the South. **Dr. Mansergh** said that there had not been much progress on the issue from the SDLP. **Mr. Reilly** wondered if there would be a positive reaction to Northern representatives in the June elections. The **Taoiseach** said that Brian Lenihan wanted a clear proposal. **Dr. Mansergh** said that a North-South Interparliamentary Body was very important, as it was a great opportunity, and ought to be pushed wherever possible. The **Taoiseach** agreed that if the North/South Parliamentary tier were active, it would do a lot.

Mr. McAteer said that there was also the question that Unionists were trying to put a prior mandate into legislation on the North/South Council, which would seriously limit the working of the Council. He said that it may require some political contact to emphasise how undesirable this would be, and to keep the issue under scrutiny. **Mr. O'Connor** said that the issue had been raised with the British at a meeting, but they insist that the notice of agenda clause in the Northern Ireland Bill is not technically a prior mandate. He said that the Irish Government would continue to push against such a clause, but that there might be even more resistance if Unionists thought that things could go on in secret.

The meeting concluded at 12.50pm.

A.NíC.
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