



# An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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Confidential

Sec Gallagher

SDLP Meeting with British Prime Minister, 22 October 1998

1. I received a read-out last evening from the SDLP on the above. Seamus Mallon gave me an overview by telephone and I subsequently got a fuller report from his Advisers, Colm Larkin and Hugh Logue, whom I (together with James McIntyre and Mairtin Ó Fainin) met in Belfast on their return from London.

Overview

2. Prime Minister Blair was accompanied by John Holmes and Jonathan Powell. The SDLP delegation comprised John Hume, Seamus Mallon, Colm Larkin and Hugh Logue. The meeting was conducted in a relaxed atmosphere ("sitting around in armchairs"). Mallon's sense was of growing impatience on Blair's part with the positions of both Trimble and Sinn Féin. He reiterated what he had said to the Taoiseach, namely that he felt both were sincere and genuinely wanted the Agreement to work, but that both seemed unable to give anything in the direction of the other. Mallon noted particularly Blair's insistence that if he "got the slightest symbolic gesture from them" (the republican side), he would "strongly twist Trimble's arm" to enable Sinn Féin to be brought into the Executive (Mallon said to me that this was "the first time in a long time" that he had heard Blair say that he would apply pressure on Trimble).
3. Mallon also had a strong sense - although this was not said explicitly - that Blair is indeed considering coming to Belfast next week. (Mallon shares our view that this would be a very risky strategy unless Blair was sure that a basis for a breakthrough existed).

4. The SDLP used the meeting to press home the reality that very little progress has been made between the parties on the issue of structures of the Northern Ireland Departments and that movement on North/South Bodies was also considerably less than the UUP were claiming. Blair repeated the line that "four Bodies are agreed" (between the SDLP and UUP). Mallon strongly rebutted this (as you did to Bill Jeffrey yesterday) and explained the actual position - namely that a certain limited amount of common ground had been identified in a number of areas, only one of which would be among the SDLP's priorities.
  
5. Blair told the SDLP that they were the "solid middle, who are keeping the whole thing together at present". Mallon used that opening to press home the reality of how difficult his own position was and the need he had for support in filling the increasing vacuum that was developing and in getting movement going. In that context, Mallon pressed strongly the option of the Informal Committee of party leaders or representatives as the most viable alternative. As we know from Blair's conversation with the Taoiseach on Tuesday, the Prime Minister is favourably disposed towards this option. He repeated his willingness to try that approach and to sell it to Trimble, although this might not be an easy task (see detail below).
  
6. John Hume told Blair that he had arranged to see Gerry Adams at the weekend. Hume said that if progress were to be made on decommissioning, the matter must be done quietly and by means of "quiet dialogue". Blair asked Hume to let him know how the discussions went and the latter agreed. (Mallon was unaware beforehand of Hume's intention to meet Adams and is not sure whether anything is likely to come of it, or what form the discussion is going to take.)

## Detail

### Situation in the Office of First and Deputy First Ministers

7. Larkin told me that it was clear that Blair did not have a sense of the reality of what was happening in Stormont (Trimble's refusal to deal with the Head of his Office, David Ferguson, and his generally bad relations with the civil service etc) and was under the impression that things were working smoothly. When told of how little work had been done (eg on the structures of Departments etc) Blair asked "are the civil service not working up stuff?" Mallon briefed him on what was actually happening. It was clear also that, until now, Blair did not have a sense of the very difficult situation that Mallon himself was in as a result. When Blair asked what he could do to help, it was at that point that Mallon pressed the idea of the Informal Committee.

### Informal Committee

8. Larkin told me that Blair, while willing to try the initiative, was concerned that  
// Trimble would have difficulty with it - "he may need something for that".  
Also, Trimble was afraid that if agreement were reached on the structures for Departments, this would lead to an automatic triggering of the D'Hondt procedure and the effective start-up of the Executive. Interestingly, Holmes had come in at that point to make clear that this was an unreasonable fear on Trimble's part, as there could be no triggering of the D'Hondt procedure until a report was made by the First and Deputy First Ministers to the Assembly (ie, control of that situation lay in Trimble's own hands).
9. Blair was reassured by this analysis. He agreed that 31 October was a critical date in the process (he consulted the text of the Agreement in talking through the detail of what was involved) and that the Committee idea could have a role in advancing the substance of what needed to be achieved by that date, even if by a different form. In that context, there was agreement on the need for a

central role for the Irish Government. Blair undertook to talk to the Taoiseach about the possibility of the Committee meeting with the Government on North/South issues.

### Short-circuiting the Executive

10. In the context of demonstrating Trimble's good faith, Blair pointed to the fact that he (Trimble) was willing to short-circuit the start-up of the full Executive and bring it forward (to December/November). Echoing our concerns, Mallon pointed to the dangers of that move in terms of the North/South Bodies - the Agreement required all the institutions to come into being at the same time; if the Executive were to "go live" in November/December, the necessary legislative and other preparations would not be completed to enable meaningful North/South Bodies to be ready by that time. Blair countered that if it were a question of parliamentary time, "I can get it through in three days" [Note: it is, of course, not just a matter of parliamentary time; detailed agreements would need to be worked up between the two Governments, involving a large range of substantial, technical, financial and other matters. On the basis of our own experience, for instance, in the establishment/merging of semi-state bodies, this is something - if it is to be got right - which will require time.]

*Still can  
institutions be  
done!*

### Martin McGuinness

11. Expanding on his sense of the position of Martin McGuinness, Blair said, as mentioned above, that he was convinced of the former's sincerity, even if he were able to offer nothing at this time. McGuinness apparently told Blair at their meeting on Monday that "if the peace process is finished, I'm finished too - and I'm not talking about my job".

### Putting Pressure on Sinn Féin

12. One suggestion came up in regard to the above that was the source of some

concern to Hume and the delegation. Blair explained that part of Trimble's fear was that if he let Sinn Fein into the Executive without a start to decommissioning, he was afraid he "would not be able to get them out" if no decommissioning ultimately took place. Hume and Mallon had responded that if that happened, "we will be the first to put them out". Taking up that idea, Blair suggested that it might be helpful if the SDLP (and possibly the Irish Government) put out a statement to the effect that if "Sinn Féin do not come up to scratch, they get kicked out". [Larkin told me that Hume was privately annoyed with Blair for putting such a suggestion, which he regarded as counter-productive. Larkin, however, wished to alert us to the suggestion, in case Blair took it up with the Taoiseach.]

not to help  
be do  
things on the  
week

Comment

13. The SDLP were pleased with the meeting and the chance that it gave them to register with Blair the real nature of the situation in the Office of the First and Deputy Ministers from their perspective. They also felt that they left him even more firmly convinced of the need for some initiative to renew momentum and that they had a useful discussion with him on the Informal Committee idea.
14. As I mentioned to you, I had a lengthy discussion last night with Larkin and Logue also on the handling of next week. I stressed to them the need for care in progressing the Informal Committee initiative with Trimble and suggested our view that this would be best left to Blair. I said that Trimble needed to get his Conference behind him before he would have any freedom to move. I also suggested that careful consideration needed to be given to the purpose and time-span of the initiative.
15. As you know, there is a meeting of the Assembly on Monday, at which Trimble and Mallon have to make a statement on the latest state of play. This is a

potentially important occasion, given its timing, and Mallon has asked for any help we can give by way of his statement.

*2  
20-10-98*

T O'Connor

23 October 1998

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23 October 1998

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Messrs. Cahon, Mansergh &  
Dalton, Ambassadors London  
& Washington; Joint  
Secretary; Counsellors A-I

4B 23/10

Dear Secretary,

**Conversation with Seamus Mallon**

I met Seamus Mallon at Heathrow yesterday evening for a read-out on the SDLP-Blair meeting at Downing Street in the late afternoon. Blair was accompanied at the meeting by Jonathan Powell and John Holmes. Alastair Campbell came in at a late stage. Hugh Logue was with Hume and Mallon (there was no reference to any other SDLP participant).

Mallon said that the Prime Minister made it abundantly clear that he is ready to work on Trimble if Sinn Fein can offer "something" on decommissioning. Blair was clearly still hoping for a breakthrough before 31 October. Mallon said that without stating so in so many words, Blair also made it clear that he hopes to go to Belfast next week.

This phase of the discussion ended with a promise by John Hume to talk to Adams over the weekend. The "something" that Sinn Fein might be asked to give was not teased out.

Blair asked the SDLP for their reaction to suggestions that the full Executive could be established significantly earlier than planned in the hope that this would produce the necessary movement from Sinn Fein. Mallon explained to Blair that the North-South dimension, including the implementing bodies, must be ready to

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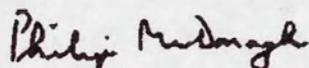
operate in parallel when powers are devolved to Northern Ireland. This would seem to rule out an early date for the putting in place of the full Executive.

The SDLP and the Prime Minister also discussed the possible setting up of a committee or group of party representatives to discuss North-South matters and other preparations for the new institutions. Mallon intimated that on this proposal there was a wide measure of agreement around the table. He added that from his own point of view, he would welcome the participation of the PUP, Alliance, and the Women's Coalition in such a group. But Mallon wondered whether Trimble will readily facilitate the establishment of an informal group. In a conversation with Mallon about a month ago, Trimble unhelpfully suggested a prior round of bilateral meetings, to last three weeks.

Mallon said that the SDLP used yesterday's meeting to correct any impression on the British side that the SDLP and the UUP have already reached agreement on some or all of the areas in which implementation bodies will be established.

I found Mallon positive and incisive in presentation, but far from optimistic about the prospects for early progress on bridging the gap between the UUP and Sinn Fein. Mallon expressed the strong apprehension that the Republican movement has never intended to decommission weapons at an early stage or in advance of seeing the bulk of the new arrangements up and running. There is a likelihood therefore of hard political times ahead.

Yours sincerely,



Philip McDonagh  
Counsellor

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## Secure Fax

**To:** Mr. Paddy Teahon  
**From:** Secretary Dermot Gallagher  
**Date:** 23 October 1998  
**Pages:** 1 + 8

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### *A-I Division Report*

-- SDLP meeting with British Prime Minister, 22 October 1998

### *London Report*

-- Conversation with Séamus Mallon

**Grateful if you could pass a copy to Dr. Mansergh**