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Meeting of Minister of State, Ms Liz O'Donnell TD, with Mr Jim Steinberg, Deputy Assistant Secretary to the President for National Security Affairs Washington, 12 February 1998

- 1. The Minister was accompanied by Ambassador O Huiginn and the undersigned. Mr Steinberg was accompanied by Mr Larry Butler.

Belfast Killings

- 2. The greater part of the meeting was devoted to the above and their implications for Sinn Fein's continued presence at the Talks. In welcoming the Minister, Steinberg said that he would have preferred the discussion with her to be taking place in a more positive climate, but the reality was that the killings clearly posed potentially very serious difficulties for the peace process. The Administration was deeply worried about how the situation was going to play out and he welcomed the opportunity to hear the perspective of the Irish Government at first hand.
- 3. The Minister agreed that the evidence emerging was troubling and problematic. The Taoiseach had indicated that, while the wish was for an inclusive process, there was a need for consistency and that the rules of the process had to be applied impartially. At the same time, the process of gathering evidence was not yet complete and a definitive decision could not be taken until that had happened. Against that background, our approach was one of caution and prudence for now. The Ambassador added that a meeting the previous day between our side and Sinn Fein had gone positively in terms of the party's approach to the substance of the Talks. There was, for instance, evidence of flexibility on the Assembly issue. However, their line on the killings was that the evidence was inconclusive. The Ambassador said that the dilemma was that on the one hand it was necessary to preserve the integrity of the process, while on the other the departure of Sinn Fein could be fatal to the whole exercise. The key questions were the conclusivity of the weight of the evidence and whether or not the operations were sanctioned from the top. The Minister said that in the UDP case the evidence was clear-cut; in this case it might prove less so.
- 4. Steinberg said that the indications they had from the British side in the course of the morning suggested that the latter were already tilting towards a negative assessment of the evidence in terms of the implications for Sinn Fein. He had had a brief conversation with the President on the matter during the morning, but they had not yet "reached a view". If the two Governments adopted a common approach, it would be difficult for the President to do other than take a similar line. Steinberg foresaw that Adams would claim that the killings had nothing to do with Sinn Fein. All this had immediate implications for the White House in terms of planning for Adams' visit to Washington later in the month. On present plans, the President proposed to "drop by" Adams' meeting in the White House. If, in the interim, the two Governments had expelled Sinn Fein from the Talks, it was difficult to see how the

President could see him. Steinberg said that the British seemed to be inclining towards the UDP model as the one which applied - ie expulsion with a hope that there could be a bridge back in. The White House wondered about the aptness of the comparison. In their view, the Loyalist cease-fire was in the nature of a bonus to the process, whereas the IRA cease-fire was at its core. The presumption had been that the latter was permanent; now it appeared that was not so. Against that background, they wondered about the credibility of a situation whereby Sinn Fein "go out for a while and then come back in".

5. It was agreed that the White House and the Government would stay in close touch as the situation unfolded.

Talks

6. In the spirit of "other than that Mrs Lincoln.....", Steinberg asked the Minister how she felt the process generally was proceeding! The Minister said that prior to the latest development, the sense was that the Talks were moving into a defining phase. The Government had tabled papers which were helping to focus the discussions on the specifics and on detail. The parties were currently responding to the questions set by the Governments in these papers and it had been intended to devote next week's session in Dublin to detailed exchanges on Strand Two. In regard to the difficulties which Sinn Fein were having on the Assembly issue, we were hoping that we could give them sufficient reassurance in the context of a balanced, inter-locking Agreement across the three Strands. Moreover, we were hopeful that next week's focus on Strand Two would have served to restore a balance from Sinn Fein's point of view between an Assembly and the North/South Council. Steinberg commented that if Sinn Fein had not envisaged some kind of Assembly, they would not be in the Talks in the first place.
7. In response to a question from Steinberg as to how important was the use of the phrase "executive powers" in regard to Strand Two, the Minister said that the Government had always attached very great significance to the concept of a strong North/South body. In terms of language, the Propositions document talked about implementing bodies. What was critical was that the body would have an executive role in regard to areas which would be designated from the outset. There would also be functional bodies operating on an all-island basis. The undersigned pointed to a recent remark by Seamus Mallon that the North/South Council would be taking decisions and implementing them. As far as he was concerned that was executive power. The Ambassador added that the key for nationalists was the fear of isolation. Apart from the practical value of what a body would do, it had to represent a meaningful "window to the South" in symbolic terms for nationalists. That was how they would make the judgement on it. Steinberg noted the zero sum difficulty - the extent to which the body represented such a symbolic window for nationalists was the extent that to which it would be problematic for unionists; yet if it were non-threatening to unionists from that standpoint, it was unlikely to pass the test of nationalists.
8. The Minister referred to the importance the Government attached to the equality "pillar" of

the package. It was going to be critical for nationalists that change was visible on the ground. It was in the equality area that this was going to be most obviously achieved. At issue was deep reform in areas such as policing, implementation of parity of esteem etc. Steinberg said that the Administration had been pressing this with the British also. Much of the problem lay in a lack of confidence; if change could be demonstrated in areas such as policing, it would be easier for Sinn Fein to sell the overall deal.

Possible Visit of President Clinton to Ireland

9. The Ambassador raised the above. Steinberg's reply made clear that Prime Minister Blair's remarks on the matter had not reflected the White House understanding of what had happened. While "we don't disagree with what Mr Blair said literally", and the "aspiration" was certainly shared, there were no plans at this time for a visit. The White House would review the situation as it developed. Whatever about a visit after an agreement had been reached, they certainly had no plans to structure one "as part of the endgame".

Taoiseach's Visit

10. The Ambassador said that the Taoiseach was looking forward to the St Patrick's Day visit. Steinberg said that planning was well advanced. In regard to the Reception for the parties, they were hoping for a smaller, tighter event this year ("we want to get rid of those on the periphery and keep it focussed on the main players"). He commented that in discussing the President's upcoming trip to Africa, one option which was being considered clashed with the Taoiseach's visit. The President made clear that the latter had priority! They were conscious that the St Patrick's Day period would represent a crucial time in the Talks and wished to maximise the value of the role they could play in that regard.
11. Steinberg thanked the Minister for the timely opportunity to exchange views and asked that we remain in close touch.

T O'Connor
12 February 1998