

SECRET

Meeting with Sinn Féin

Sunday, 28th July 1996

PST

PSS

Mr Teahen

Mr Dutton

ACK

30/7

1. I met Mr. Aidan McAteer and Ms. Rita O'Hare of Sinn Féin at their request on Sunday, 28th July.
2. They asked for an assessment of the current talks. I confirmed the broad picture already in the media, i.e. prospective agreement on the rules of procedure, but a problem looming up on the handling of the decommissioning issue. Since there was now almost no hope of settling the procedural handling of decommissioning before the Summer break, it was possible that delegations might choose to end on the comparatively more positive note of agreement on rules of procedure, rather than in the middle of a highly polarising debate on decommissioning. I said a certain amount of skirmishing on procedural issues by the unionist parties was always inevitable and one should not jump to premature conclusions about the future of the talks. Nevertheless, it was discouraging that there was so little sense of urgency about advancing to substantive negotiations. Trimble's public demeanour, at such a fraught time, including his interview in the Sunday Tribune was also very worrying.
3. The Sinn Féin side thought the lack of clarity on decommissioning was unfortunate, since the IRA attitude was very likely to be one of "wait and see" for as long as this was so.
4. They then up-dated me on a confidential basis on the most recent exchanges relating to the contacts between Mr. Hume and the Prime Minister. They had

found Mr. Major's response unforthcoming, but also misrepresenting their position. For that reason Mr. Adams had written to Mr. Hume on 26th July, recalling for the record the terms of an earlier letter of his to Mr. Hume and asking that the British side be reminded for the record that that was the Sinn Féin position.

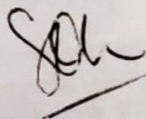
5. I asked the Sinn Féin representatives what the particular misrepresentations in Mr. Major's letter were. Their objections seemed to centre on the reference to decommissioning. Mr. Adams' earlier letter to Mr. Hume had listed the criterion of "no preconditions, with special emphasis on the decommissioning issue". Sinn Féin also found inadequate clarity on the question of a timeframe and confidence-building measures.
6. They indicated they would welcome any help from us in relation to improved wording. They stressed that in any contacts with the British, we should emphasise that the Sinn Féin initiative was in good faith, and also point to the restraint exercised by the IRA in the very difficult situation after Drumcree. I said the British might say that was merely consistent with the strategy of violence in Britain and a de facto ceasefire in Ireland. Without our in any way diminishing the importance of the latter, it was sooner or later bound to fall victim to any campaign of violence elsewhere.
7. I urged again the crucial importance of reinstating the ceasefire. As regards the Hume initiative, while it was important to have the right wording, the wording itself could not credibly be dissociated from the situation on the ground and in the Talks. There was a dangerous month in prospect. If the Derry situation went wrong, it would have a knock-on effect throughout Northern Ireland. I urged strongly that Sinn Féin should use all its influence on the residents to press for a magnanimous solution. Counter-marches, such

as the one which had happened in Derry last week, merely sank to the very foolish Orange agenda of political assertion by unwanted marches. If the nationalist community played that game, they would be merely offering Trimble a kind of retrospective justification, and would alienate sympathy as surely as the Orange marches did.

8. The second and obvious problem over the summer was the possibility of further atrocities in Britain. For as long as that was possible, or, as many feared, even likely, given the finds, etc., it was understandable that no British Prime Minister could go out on a limb on this issue. Neither could any Irish Government insist on a risky British outreach to the Republican movement, since, if it went wrong, our advice would be discredited as never before.

9. In the course of a general discussion of the prospects, I suggested that in terms of working for the earliest possible restoration of the ceasefire, it was worthwhile pursuing Hume's dialogue with the British, with our background support as far as possible, but that the issue of language could not really be divorced from the situation on the ground. If we returned in September, no worse than we had left the situation, and if an IRA ceasefire had been reinstated, or at a minimum at the point where that could be done on the basis of reasonable language, and reasonable dispositions in relation to the talks process, it would be possible to approach the British on a much more solid footing. It could be possible for the Irish Government to work out a realistic and attainable programme in relation to the talks, the handling of decommissioning, and a timeframe, possibly in the form of a review, and to make a strong push to dot the i's and cross the t's with the British in relation to such a programme. If, however, street violence had taken over or if there were further atrocities in Britain, then any such hopes were almost certainly forlorn.

10. I understand that any further input to the Hume/Major channel will be done orally by Adams to Hume. They seemed uncertain when this might be done, or what the content would be, not least because of uncertainty about Mr. Hume's holiday plans. Because of their concern for confidentiality, they did not leave with me the text of Mr. Adams' letter to Hume. It was, however, essentially for the record and recalled the position in Adams' first letter to Hume, which had been along the policy lines already known to us from their public statements.



Sean Ó hUiginn

29 July 1996