



C O V E R

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S H E E T

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COMMENTS:

Meeting with Quentin Thomas, 2 September

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Meeting with Mr. Quentin Thomas

2 September, 1996

1. I met Mr. Quentin Thomas in London on 2 September, following a suggestion from him that we should take an informal look at the prospects for the resumed talks.
2. I cautioned that I had been out of contact with our own system for the past two weeks, but that it would be very helpful for our preparations for the resumed talks to know how the British now saw matters.
3. Thomas said some key players had been absent on their side also, but that nevertheless a certain amount of thinking had gone on within their system. Much of it had been what he described as "fly swatting", i.e. batting away various impractical ideas. Their considered view was that the present policy approach, however problematic, was better than any of the alternatives. He demurred from any over-negative assessment of the talks process. It had been very tedious to "reinvent" the rules of procedure, but nevertheless, that had given the unionists a certain sense of ownership.
4. He listed various contacts which Michael Ancram would have with the parties in the coming week. He himself had had lunch recently with Peter Robinson. He found it encouraging, up to a point. Robinson felt that Strand One had effectively been negotiated in 1992. His protests about the Framework Document and North/South functions were dutiful rather than vehement. He had suggested a small sub-committee comprising one representative of each of the "four main parties" to progress matters.

5. I said we too would want to pursue in good faith all options to make a success of the present policy. I cautioned against any notion that the "unionist ownership" of the process had been cost-free. On the contrary: every non-unionist party - and not just the SDLP - had found the talks process so far profoundly discouraging and dispiriting. The sense of despondency about unionist intentions had been given dramatic external corroboration at Drumcree. If the talks resumed in the same spirit as they had left off, it was only a matter of time until they collapsed. The rivalries in the unionist camp meant it was extraordinarily difficult for any of the unionist leaders to take a constructive initiative. The drive had to come from the Governments. I wondered whether we could make use of Strand Three for that purpose.

Thomas said that in the British view Strand Two was the crucial one. It was the only forum where all the parties were represented, and both Governments were agreed that all the external dimensions of the problem could be on the table there.

6. I said that we, too, assumed that both Governments would stay committed to the policy framework we had adopted in the Anglo-Irish Agreement, the Joint Declaration, the Framework Document, etc. The accommodation of the problem had been, in a sense, already agreed at the metropolitan level. The question was whether the Northern Ireland parties could buy into that accommodation and make it their own. The summer had shown there was little mood for outreach in the unionist community. In turn, I felt events would have made the nationalist community, now deeply angry, even more wary than heretofore about a devolved administration dominated by the present unionist leadership. Thomas enquired whether I saw an actual policy change on the nationalist side to that effect. I said I thought it rather an attitudinal shift which would colour the demeanour of nationalist negotiators as these things came on the agenda.


7. I recalled that one of the most immediate challenges facing the resumed talks process was how to handle the decommissioning problem. Thomas said there had been some acknowledgement within the British system, post Drumcree, that the "terms of trade" had shifted somewhat on the decommissioning issue. Nevertheless, they felt the best approach was the one already adopted in the June 6th papers and the Mitchell Report. I said we too remained committed to that route, provided the unionist parties bought in. However, a protracted stand-off on decommissioning would inflict still further serious damage on the credibility of the process. Unionists were perversely demanding from a non-inclusive process, goals which made sense and could be delivered, if at all, only in an inclusive process. If the decommissioning stand-off were a protracted one, it might be necessary for Irish Government spokesmen to begin to focus more and more openly on that absurdity. The unionists might be challenged, if they were so keen on decommissioning, to create the inclusive process which alone would make it possible.
8. Thomas said that he hoped they would have advance notice of any such shift on our part. There would be a danger that it could be misinterpreted as diluting the ceasefire pre-condition for Sinn Féin participation. I said we remained firmly committed to that, but if the stalemate continued, public credibility would require that the unionists at some point be faced with the contradictions in their position. Thomas expressed some hope that it might be possible to adhere to our original approach on decommissioning. Most unionists were privately unconvinced by Ken Maginnis' complicated and unrealistic "benchmarking" scenario. They might be prepared to settle for an annotated agenda or work programme, to show that the proposed sub-committee would do real business, with perhaps some additional sweeteners such as the draft legislation by the two Governments.

9. I said we would not be opposed to working out a sensible agenda in advance for the sub-committee, and we had done very considerable work on the draft legislation which could be finalised without too much delay. However, we should have an eye to public credibility and not appear to drift into "cloud cuckoo land" on a decommissioning scenario without even the involvement, much less the cooperation, of one of the key protagonists. If we were to table draft legislation, it should be after the sub-committee was up and running, and not something to be pocketed by the unionists in advance. Thomas handed over informally a piece of paper (attached), illustrating a work plan for the proposed sub-committee. I said we would look at it within our own system, and the matter could be addressed more fully when the Secretary of State met the Tánaiste on Thursday.
10. We then had a discussion on the Sinn Féin dimension. Thomas said they found it hard to reconcile the very hopeful signals from John Hume, contrasted with the more difficult, and shifting position taken by Sinn Féin spokespersons. I said that we had by no means written off the prospects for a renewed ceasefire. The continued threat of violence in Britain was appalling, but nevertheless Sinn Féin had passed over a dream opportunity in the wake of Drumcree to return to violence in Northern Ireland. We believed key elements of the leadership were still anxious to restore a full ceasefire. The uncertainty on decommissioning was a very major inhibiting factor. If the decommissioning issue could be handled sensibly in the talks, we would then be able to test much more fully the sincerity or otherwise of these indications. The other elements they required (assurance of meaningful talks, timeframe, confidence building measures) should not be insuperable difficulties.
11. Thomas enquired whether Sinn Féin had written off the present British administration. I pointed out that McGuinness' reference to a "six to nine

month timeframe" seemed to envisage some continuum between this administration and the next. I felt the Sinn Féin leadership harboured few illusions about a future Labour administration.

12. I asked Thomas how he felt the unionists would react if a new Sinn Féin ceasefire was unequivocally reinstated and they sought admission to the talks. He said Robinson had felt that in those circumstances some "proximity nonsense" might be necessary for a while. Thomas remarked that Robinson seemed to assume complacently that if the DUP went into the proximity mode, the damage would be inflicted on Sinn Féin. He did not seem to realise that in those circumstances, Sinn Féin would be directly at the table, and the DUP would not.
13. I asked Thomas, in view of Sinn Féin's suspicions that that the talks would not be "for real", whether a work plan for Strand Three (as the strand controlled by the Governments) could be worked out between the two Governments which would offer reassurance to Sinn Féin, much as an annotated work plan on decommissioning might offer reassurance to the unionists. Thomas was cautious on this point, but did not rule out such an approach, provided whatever document was agreed was in the public domain as a normal part of the talks.
14. We discussed briefly the parade issue. I argued the absolute necessity of having this dimension under control before the next marching season. We would be talking with the Residents Groups, and putting forward some ideas. I urged in particular they should look at the panoply of insurance and bonding-type requirements which might offer a relatively non-political way of instilling some sense of responsibility into the organisers of potentially confrontational parades. The question of payment for police time might also be looked at.

15. We discussed the current situation in the loyalist camp. Thomas recalled that we would have to address a number of accusations of infringement of the Mitchell principles. He asked whether we agreed with their suggestion that such accusations should, in the first instance, be referred to the accused party for a response. I agreed that seemed the necessary and appropriate first step. We both agreed that it would be important to try and keep the loyalist parties at the talks. I indicated that we would be prepared to give the benefit of all legitimate doubts towards that end. Thomas recalled that, apart from the importance of their participation in itself, the small loyalist parties also had a potentially use function in topping-up Trimble's deficit for "sufficient consensus".
16. The British approach is, essentially, "as-you-were" in relation to the talks. They see the maximum realistic goal in the interval between this and the British General election to have a credible process up and running. Thomas, for his own part at least, showed a continuing interest and commitment in having this process fully inclusive, with Sinn Féin involved after a restoration of the ceasefire. At the same time, it was clear that they still look to a very gradualist and evolutionary approach as their preferred option, giving unionists maximum "ownership". They are likely to remain reticent on any "jump start" approach, from this concern about unionist attitudes, and, no doubt also, from a realistic assessment of the party relationships at Westminster.



Sean Ó hUiginn

3 September 1996

(7 August 1996)

WORKPLAN FOR FURTHER PROGRESS ON DECOMMISSIONING ALONGSIDE THE THREE STRANDS

1. Enabling legislation: consideration of draft Bills published by both Governments on [] to provide the legislative framework to implement the International Body's report.
2. Modalities: consideration of options for, and agreement on outline of, decommissioning scheme, including role of independent commission.
3. Other confidence-building measures: consideration of other aspects of the International Body's report which participants may consider relevant.
4. Passage of legislation: enactment of enabling legislation.
5. Detailed scheme: finalisation of detailed scheme, including any necessary subordinate legislation on amnesty, powers and privileges of commission etc.
6. Phasing and sequencing: agreement on:
 - phasing necessary to secure balanced mutual decommissioning; and
 - sequencing, in relation to political negotiations, necessary to lead to 'a progressive pattern of mounting trust and confidence'.
7. Independent Commission: establishment by International Agreement of the independent commission, and activation of the relevant order/regulations.

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8. Promulgation of decommissioning scheme and activation of other relevant orders/regulations.
9. Other confidence building measures: implementation of mutual confidence-building.
10. Actual decommissioning: in the context of an inclusive and dynamic process building trust and confidence as progress is made on the issues.

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