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**Meeting with Seamus Mallon**

**31st March, 1996**

SEEN BY  
TAOISEACH

1. I had lunch with Seamus Mallon on the 31st March.
2. He continues to be deeply concerned about the prospect of the election, and particularly the degree of preparedness of his party.
3. He felt the SDLP Council meeting the previous day had been ineffectual, confirming his doubts about the newly formed general council. The business of the meeting had been comprehensively leaked to Liam Clarke in the Sunday Times. Mallon expressed his own scepticism about the likelihood of 44 people being able to formulate any sensible strategy. He has been long urging John Hume to revamp the party spokesmanships, as a way of renovating the party structure and forming a coherent inner core to take the necessary decisions.
4. The debate at the Council meeting had shown that there was an element of the party interested in participating in the Forum. Mallon's assumption is that Sinn Féin would not join in the Forum, and therefore for the SDLP to be in alone in an essentially unionist forum would be very unwise tactics. I urged that this decision should also be kept open until the position becomes clearer.
5. On the elections as such, he had urged at the Council meeting that the real "political call" was whether the scenario as outlined at present was going to be sustained in the legislative process and in the discussions between the two Governments. If so, he felt there was no option but to contest the election.

If not, there would be no problem since he assumed that even the Irish Government would have to revise its position if there was substantial change (e.g. a link between the negotiating process and the forum).

6. As regards the negotiations, Mallon reviewed different scenarios, depending on whether the ceasefire was reinstated and whether the unionists approached the negotiations in a constructive spirit. He thought the most delicate scenario for the SDLP was the one where Sinn Féin were excluded from the Forum and the Unionists saw that as an opportunity to do a deal with the SDLP, who thereby would have to judge if and how they could do a deal with Sinn Féin outside the tent.

7. He had no information as to the "scenario" Hume was working on to restore the ceasefire. He assumed it related to some agreed platform between the Irish Government, the SDLP and Sinn Féin for the purposes of negotiations.

He had argued strongly to Hume that there was in fact already such a platform in the form of the Joint Framework Document. He expressed doubts however whether the Joint Framework Document would be a sufficient platform for Sinn Féin in that context. He assumed that the Irish Government would be tabling the document in any case.

interesting.  
JB

8. Mallon expressed deep concerns about the state of readiness of the SDLP for the election. There was a plethora of decisions to be taken in relation to it, e.g. selection of lists for each constituency, etc. I briefed him on British intentions, as we understood them from our discussions. I promised also we would give him a technical note on the different electoral counting methods, in time for his meeting with the Secretary of State on Monday afternoon.



9. He said he did not understand the technical dimension of the election, but had been informed by those who did that it was "six of one and half a dozen of the other". I agreed one could only be certain about the relative advantage of the different systems if one had an accurate assessment of the likely vote in each constituency, since all such mechanisms were potentially two-edged. Mallon thought this would be difficult, not only because the constituencies were new, but also because this particular election was very unpredictable.

10. (Mallon has expressed a consistent fear that a protest dimension or a desire to have the strongest tribal positions represented at the table will give a boost to Sinn Féin and to the DUP. He felt no precedent should be drawn from the European elections, where Hume drew considerable support from Sinn Féin and also from other quarters. Mallon also feared a low turnout. He had no rooted objection to the provision for observers at talks, although he pointed out that if the loyalist paramilitaries failed to make the "top ten", that made a political statement in itself.

11. I asked him whether Hume was still advocating the referendum, possibly as a way of maximising the turnout through a plebescite on peace. Mallon was unsure of this, but repeated his own opposition to the proposal and his firm belief that the referendum option should be kept in reserve until there was a concrete package to endorse.

12. We discussed the possibility of a further meeting between the SDLP and the Government. Mallon said he would be very much in favour, but strictly on the basis of an agreed agenda. There was the little point in vague discussions which went all over the place. (Clearly his hope would be that such a meeting might help to sponsor the necessary debate and decision-making within the party). I said I would investigate the possibilities in that respect.

Hume is still  
arguing the  
referendum  
to me.  
JB

13. We discussed the likely timetable for British legislation, as we understood it. Mallon expressed concern about the ability of the SDLP members to handle effectively the challenges of work at the committee stage, if that arose. I assured him that we would give any informal assistance that we could through the Embassy.

Sean Ó hUiginn

1 April 1996