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SDLP Meeting with Prime Minister Major

19 February, 1996

1. I spoke to Seamus Mallon on the above.
2. He said it was "as frosty a meeting as I've ever been at". Prime Minister Major was extremely hardline in his point of view. Many of his comments were downright offensive to Hume and Mallon.
3. Major had begun by stating there were four principles: (a) violence should not stop the process; (b) it was necessary to establish if the goal of all-party talks was achievable; (c) how to react to "events"; (d) how to move forward.
4. Major said that every incident made progress more difficult and the spectre of loyalist retaliation was in the background.
5. There followed an exchange between Hume and Major as to how all-party talks could be launched, and to what extent Adams had a hold on the situation. (Major found it difficult to believe that Adams did not know.)
6. Major said he wanted to set a firm date for all-party talks in the next three weeks. He was categorical and absolute that he could not get all-party talks without an election. The election would be followed by negotiations, not talks. Major said he wanted to agree with the Irish Government on the modus operandi, date and form of elections, etc. He would also want to agree the date for all-party negotiations. He envisaged that strand two might be chaired by an Irish Government chairman, and strand three by a British

Government chairman, or they might chair jointly and alternately. He said he wanted negotiations within eight weeks of today.

7. Mallon asked about Sinn Féin involvement in the proximity talks. Major confirmed that the Government ban on Ministerial contacts with Sinn Féin would not preclude their involvement in proximity talks, since they could be talked to by officials.
8. The SDLP raised the issue of how Major could guarantee what unionists would do. Major barked at them that he would deal with the unionists.
9. Major made clear that Sinn Féin could take part in post election negotiations, even if violence was on-going, provided they signed a "piece of paper". If after the announcement of the election there was an IRA ceasefire, Major would meet Adams.
10. In relation to the referendum proposal, Major kept insisting that the unionists would not negotiate without an electoral mandate. He accepted the possibility of a referendum on the same day. However he excluded a question on all-party negotiations from such a referendum. (I asked Mallon why he thought this was so: he thought Major's reasoning was that since the Governments themselves were not committed to all-party negotiations (?), it was not appropriate for a referendum question.)
11. Mallon asked him how the elected representatives not engaged in negotiations would be occupied while negotiations were on-going. Major seemed to envisage that they would be involved in "Forum-style stuff". Mallon expressed his scepticism that they would stick to the script in that respect.

12. Major repeated several times that the real reason for an election was to give the unionists a mandate to negotiate and not just to talk. That would be guaranteed in the legislation. Mallon asked whether that would involve a "duty of service" to negotiate and to do so on a three-stranded basis. Major reverted to the mantra that the unionists should be left to him. He dismissed the "duty of service" notion on the basis that it had caused trouble in the debate on the Maastricht Treaty.
13. Mallon said that the meeting had been so confrontational at times he had to bring Hume, who wanted to leave the meeting, back to the table. At the end of the meeting they had referred to the indexing system. Major said he would listen and would look at it.
14. I asked Mallon how matters had been left. Mallon said that Major had listed the meetings he would be having with Trimble, the Irish Government, etc. They understood his remarks to mean that at the end of that period he would go ahead with an elective process regardless.
15. On the general assessment of the meeting, Mallon thought that Major was showing to the full a vindictive side of his character which had not been evident previously. He mentioned also that Mayhew's role at the meeting had been mostly perfunctory, with Ancram as the real point of reference for Major in the discussions.