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31 January 1996

Confidential

Mr Sean O hUiginn
Second Secretary
Anglo Irish Division
Dept of Foreign Affairs

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Dear Secretary

Conversation with Seamus Mallon

Seamus Mallon came to the Embassy this morning where he briefed us on the SDLP meeting with the Prime Minister yesterday. I was accompanied by Philip McDonagh.

Atmosphere and Approach

Mallon began by saying that it had been a tough meeting and the atmosphere had been "bitter and frosty" throughout. He had decided in advance to raise his own weekend comments on the Prime Minister in order to clear the air, but he had warned Major that it might be better that they not go too deeply into the issue or else everyone might get hurt. In the event Major had not taken him up on the challenge and the discussion had moved onto the substance of British Government policy. Here again the SDLP tactic had been to let the Prime Minister do the talking, forcing him to explain and develop the approach and policy outlined in the Commons last week, especially on the election issue. They themselves had remained completely reserved on the election proposal and had been careful to give nothing away either on the principle or on the detail.

Elections

Major told them that his Commons approach last week had effectively enabled him to get off the hook of Washington 3. Having done this he wanted to see how the elective process idea could be made to work. For their part the SDLP had raised a series of questions to which the Prime Minister had answered as follows:

Link between Election and All Party Talks: Major saw a direct route between the election and inclusive negotiations. In his view the negotiations could open almost immediately after the elections and within a week of the formation of the resultant forum or body.

Three-Stranded Process: The SDLP had emphasised to Major that any election would have to form part of a three-stranded process involving the Irish Government. It was not enough to speak of a three-stranded agenda. Major did not dispute this.

Opening of Body: Major envisaged that the Body would be opened and addressed by the Taoiseach and himself.

Setting up of Negotiating Teams: The Prime Minister thought that it would take about a week to establish negotiating teams from the Body.

Duration of Negotiations: Major saw the entire process lasting for about a year.

Size of Body: According to Mallon Major is wedded to a 90-member chamber.

Having established these facts Hume had quizzed the Prime Minister on his envisaged timetable pointing out the difficulties arising from the Parliamentary and Northern Ireland timetables. The Easter break, the marching season, the Summer recess would mean that little real work could be done before matters are overtaken by the Westminster elections. Major had not really responded to these concerns. (Comment: There is no reason why the negotiations themselves should be tied to a parliamentary timetable although the point that they could be affected by the marching season and Westminster politics has some force). Hume and Mallon pressed Major on whether he could deliver the Unionists on an election scheme of the kind he had outlined. Major replied that he would be taking the matter up with the Unionist parties in the near future. (I understand that he is to see Paisley today and Trimble tomorrow).

Future Meeting

Mallon told us that Major had undertaken to come back to them within a fortnight and the SDLP side had asked him to put his ideas on paper.

Overall Situation

I asked Seamus how he now viewed the situation from the Nationalist point of view. It was possible to argue that in moving from Washington 3 to the election route that Major had handed some cards to the Nationalist side since their agreement would be required to the procedure and mandate for any elective process. Seamus agreed with this. He thought that Major's position might now be weaker than he realised. In handling it in the way he did the Prime Minister had

courted US disapproval; had lost the trust of the Nationalist community, which he would have to win back; had put himself in a position of explaining his ideas in greater detail to the SDLP; and had given the SDLP the opportunity of having a greater say in shaping the process than they could possibly have had if he had stuck to the Washington 3 route. He thought that John Hume shared this view and that John had been much happier after yesterday's meeting than he had been for some time.

Mallon was satisfied that they had given nothing away on the election issue. They had given no indication as to whether they would participate either in elections or in a body and they had told Major that a discussion not to participate in elections would have wide populist support amongst the Nationalist community in Northern Ireland.

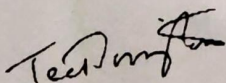
Notwithstanding all this Mallon was aware of real difficulties ahead on the decommissioning issue and in particular how to achieve the Mitchell Body's idea of some decommissioning during the process of all-party negotiations. This was not just a problem for Sinn Fein. He said that a recent meeting with the UDP and the PUP Ervine in addressing the issue had said that "they won't get a scrap."

Mallon also briefed us on their two meetings with Tony Blair and this will be the subject of a second report.

Postscript

In a brief conversation John Holmes told me that although the meeting with the SDLP had been tough, they thought that the Prime Minister's emphasis on elections as a direct route into talks had made an impression on the SDLP side. After the meeting the Prime Minister had commented to Holmes that his forthcoming meetings with the DUP and UUP leaders could be just as difficult in the light of the differences in approach between the Prime Minister's views on elections and those of Dr Paisley and Mr Trimble. The Prime Minister has written to the Taoiseach replying to his letter of last Friday and outlining some of the ideas discussed with the SDLP yesterday. This is to issue today.

Yours sincerely



Edward Barrington
Ambassador