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From: Veronica Sutherland  
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To: PS/Sofs (L&B & PROCB)  
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R. D. J. J.

#### CONVERSATION WITH SEAN O'HUIGINN, 5 JULY

1. I called on Sean o'hUiginn late on Friday afternoon. He was at his gloomiest and complained bitterly about the inadequate facilities at Stormont House, particularly the absence of any kind of meeting room. He compared it unfavourably with Dublin Castle.

2. O'hUiginn gave me a long lecture, focussing particularly on decommissioning; his arguments were familiar so I will not rehearse them all. The main points were:

- discussions in the North were proceeding at a glacial pace which was dispiriting.
- The British should not make the mistake of thinking that the existence of talks in itself was necessarily a good thing. Sometimes the existence of talks merely served to disguise radical differences and thus to waste time. In such circumstances it would be better to end them.
- It was not clear whether the Unionists really wanted progress. McCarthy was aggressive and harangued his audiences at length. Trimble had difficulty in deciding whether he was a statesman or a tribal leader.
- The position of the SDLP was extremely difficult. Hume was rarely in Belfast. In any case, he was only willing to look only at the big picture. Mallon, who did want the talks to progress, was the single Nationalist voice round the table, confronting the range of unforgiving and obstructive Unionists.

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- The Irish Government had successfully persuaded the SDLP to compromise on individual points, eg rules of procedure. The British however had failed similarly to persuade the Unionists, who shifted ground all the time.
- Senator Mitchell might find the situation so disagreeable that he would refuse to continue beyond November when Washington might offer more interesting opportunities.
- The main problem remained decommissioning. O'hUiginn said almost in despair that he could read neither Sinn Fein nor the British Government. Just as he could not really believe that Sinn Fein failed to understand the impact of the Manchester bomb on the peace talks, so too he found it incomprehensible that the British Government could not see that insistence on decommissioning would inevitably destroy the peace progress. At this point the argument became somewhat incoherent. He claimed that decommissioning remained Trimble's main difficulty. Any flexibility on his part on this issue would automatically alienate many of his supporters. Oh'Uiginn said that he could not work out whether the British Government were stupid and did not realise the consequences of their position on decommissioning; or whether they were duplicitous and malign, and actually wanted to destroy the peace process.
- He was not optimistic about a ceasefire, not least because Adams could not deliver one without knowing what will happen on decommissioning.

3. There was much more in the same vein. Confronted with a man so obsessed and despondent, I thought it fruitless to engage in argument point for point. I did however stress very firmly that the British Government was trying to make the process work and any suggestion that our position on decommissioning was designed to destroy the peace process was wrong. After all, our position is now firmly based on the Mitchell Report.

4. This conversation was in complete contrast to a more relaxed discussion I had with Paddy Teahon earlier in the week. He too admitted that the talks were proceeding at a glacial pace. He hoped that at least there would be agreement on procedural issues by the end of July. He was no longer so optimistic about a resumption of the ceasefire. Nevertheless he took comfort from the fact that, according to Irish sources, including representatives of Irish Americans, 85% of Republicans wanted peace. If there was a ceasefire, in Teahon's view the only qualification for Sinn Fein to enter the talks should be acceptance of the Mitchell principles. This would leave it open to the Unionists to ask Sinn Fein how they could square acceptance of the principles with the continued existence of the IRA. On internment, he thought this might eventually prove necessary, but the time was not yet ripe.

5. Both o'hUiginn and Teahon agreed that the marches over the week-end and the follow-up this week would be critical for the future of the talks.

(Signed)  
Veronica Sutherland  
AMBASSADOR

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