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**Meeting between the Government and the Alliance Party,
Government Buildings,
7p.m. Thursday, 5 September, 1996**



Present

Irish Government

Taoiseach

Minister of State, Mr. Hugh Coveney, T.D.

The Attorney General

Mr. Seán Donlon, Special Adviser to the Taoiseach

Mr. Walter Kirwan, Assistant Secretary, Department of the Taoiseach

Mr. David Cooney, Counsellor, Department of Foreign Affairs

Alliance Party

Mr. John Alderdice, Leader

Mr. Seamus Close, Deputy Leader

Mr. Steve McBride, Party Chairman

Mr. Seán Neeson

Ms. Eileen Bell

1. The Taoiseach opened by referring to the sense of alarm and to the deepening of distrust in Northern Ireland arising from the events at the time of Drumcree in July and from the events and developments that had followed. This more polarised atmosphere must make it very difficult for those, like Alliance, who were seeking to build in the centre. He first wished, therefore, to encourage them to continue in their efforts.
2. He mentioned that the Government had met the SDLP the previous day and that he himself had had contact by telephone with David Trimble, Leader of the Ulster Unionist Party. The Government had encouraged the SDLP to be as positive as possible when they met the Ulster Unionist earlier that day. Unless one could build on the centre ground, it would not be possible to move forward. The SDLP and, in particular, John Hume, continued to hold out hope for an early ceasefire by the IRA - but it seemed less likely now that a sincere ceasefire would happen, as distinct from a

tactical ceasefire, which might be a possibility. As the Government saw it, the best prospect for a durable ceasefire would be if the train, as it were, were seen to be leaving the station, with the talks process getting up some steam.

3. The Attorney General said that he was anxious to hear how Alliance would see a dynamic being injected into the Belfast talks process, in its first couple of days, when it resumed on the following Monday, 9 September. It seemed likely that there could be an early dispute about the DUP effort to have the PUP and UDP excluded from the talks. It was also possible that the Unionists would revert to putting an exclusive or undue emphasis on decommissioning.

4. Dr. Alderdice said that he agreed with the Taoiseach's analysis. He recalled his comments at the previous meeting last June about the depth of polarisation between the communities. Things had got even worse. Real hatred was building up. People were saying that they were going to give up trying to understand the other side, that they were fed up trying to do so. Nationalists were saying that they would never get anywhere with Unionists and that things are, in any event, going our way in the longer term. Unionists were saying that the SDLP were not interested in reaching an agreement but were rather chasing after Sinn Féin. All were saying that the events of the summer confirmed their worst assessments.

5. The British Government did not appreciate how serious Drumcree was. They did not even yet appreciate that it was about sovereignty, in the sense of "who runs the place"? He (Dr. Alderdice) has reason to know not that its significance was not properly appreciated - it was seen as a march issue. Some responsibility for this lies with top officers in the RUC and senior officials in the NIO. Chief Countable Annesley was irredeemably arrogant. He had dismissively rejected Alliance's proposal for a Ministry of Justice, insisting on complete independence for the police. The Police Authority had experienced great difficulty in dealing with him. Annesley took the first decision without taking into account the lessons of 1983. Proper preparations and arrangements to preempt and deal with disruption were not made.

6. It would have been better had the loyalist mob hammered down the RUC; in that situation, the police would have been seen trying to do the right thing and one would have had the opposite reaction from nationalists to what had emerged in the event. The reversal of the first decision had led to grave misunderstanding between the Irish and British Government and a complete lack of confidence in the latter on the part of Northern nationalists.
7. He (Dr. Alderdice) had never seen the situation so bad as at the time of the disruption associated with Drumcree. He had been forced to take detours several times due to blockades on the roads.
8. What conclusions were to be drawn? For him and Alliance, this was not a new story. They could not but come back to their original view that the attempt to get all parts of the political spectrum on board was a fantasy and was dangerous nonsense. The only way forward was to try to build on the centre of the political span - although he was not now certain that this would be possible.
9. We are facing a very serious situation in regard to the divisions within the Loyalist paramilitaries. We are not far from the creation of Loyalist Provos. There was a risk that people like David Ervine and Billy Hutchinson would find themselves in the same position, on the unionist side, as John Lowry and The Workers' Party in the North were on the nationalist side - expressing impeccable sentiments but with no troops behind them. Trimble and McCrea were creating Loyalist paramilitaries, so that there would be a perceived threat at the back of them.
10. The Taoiseach asked Dr. Alderdice to develop this analysis. Dr. Alderdice said that Trimble had never assented to the three-stranded process. He and Paisley would not wish the Loyalists to remain in the talks process. Trimble thinks that Molyneaux sold the pass in 1991. Trimble continues to believe that it is possible to go for a more UK-focussed solution, a more internal solution than that broadly set out in the Framework Document. Alliance had thought that people like Empey, Donaldson and Ken Maginness might be able to bring Trimble to see the reality of the need for a


balanced settlement. Now, however, Unionists were saying "what is the point"? The perception was that Nationalists were not themselves interested in seeking such a balanced settlement.

11. The Taoiseach said that it would be very difficult for any combination of parties in government in the South to abandon any idea that a restoration of the IRA ceasefire could be possible. His interpretation was that Dr. Alderdice was recommending a return to the approach, pursued in the 1970s, of building up the centre of politics in the North. If so, what was proposed was a very big project. A lot of expectations had been invested in the present process. It would be very hard to unwind. People had had such high hopes.
12. Dr. Alderdice indicated agreement with this assessment. He noted, however, that nobody even pretends that a restored IRA ceasefire would be a complete cessation of violence. But a very dangerous situation was looming. Hitherto, there have not been pro-active loyalists paramilitaries, as distinct from reactive forces, who reacted to republican violence. Alliance were not, there and then, recommending that an alternative approach be followed. They were saying that all concerned have now to commence to start a process of reflection and analysis in the light of events and of the up-to-date situation.
13. The Taoiseach asked whether, instead of engaging in analysis, it would be better to encourage elements in the SDLP willing to go for a compromise and, similarly, to encourage the more old-fashioned elements among the Unionists. The Taoiseach said that this Government would be willing to support, in practice, if not in terms of any public statements, a building up of the political centre.
14. Dr. Alderdice agreed that this approach could be followed, irrespective of the public rationales being articulated. He did not think, however, that those within the SDLP favouring such an approach had "the bottle" to toughen it out. The Attorney General posed the question as to whether other people may not be frightening themselves into the centre for fear of the consequences of alternative approaches? The Taoiseach said

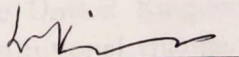
that many in the SDLP do agree on the need to combat a deepening of inter-communal polarisation. At the meeting with the SDLP the previous day, Seamus Mallon had spoken eloquently on the need to step back from the sectarian abyss. He had used very strong language in expressing his abhorrence of sectarianism.

15. Sean Donlon asked how wide, geographically, was the potential from Loyalist Provisim. Mr. Close responded that if anybody had told him three months ago that 4,000 people would turn out at a public rally in Portadown to support "King Rat", he would have said they were mad - but this had happened. The Attorney General asked whether there were others among the Unionist leadership, apart from Trimble, who understood the dangers in the present situation. Dr. Alderdice said that John Taylor, for one, did not like what was happening but he and others of like mind wonder what is the point of putting their head above the parapet, if nationalists are not, as they believe, serious about seeking agreement. For Alliance, there was a big question-mark as to how far the British could push those in the Unionists open to accommodation, as the Irish Government could push those in the SDLP.
16. The Attorney General asked what should be done at the outset of the talks resuming in Belfast the following Monday. Dr. Alderdice said that one had to expect that there would be some politicking. In his view, the need was to get the SDLP and the Ulster Unionists doing business. Alliance wondered, however, whether there must now be a question-mark over Senator Mitchell's investment in the process, in view of his dispiriting experience of it to date.
17. Mr. Close noted that Sinn Féin were the winners from the events of the summer. In an election held now, Sinn Féin would get 20% of the vote and Seamus Mallon would be at risk of losing his seat. Mr. Neeson said that Alliance had hoped that the situation would improve once the marching season was over. This had not happened and it was still deteriorating. He now doubts if Reg Empey is as benevolent as we might have thought.

18. Dr. Alderdice posed the question as to why did Drumcree happen? Unionists were taking the view that nationalists had become insatiable. There was also a big question-mark over the bona fides of Sinn Fein once the IRA ceasefire was broken. It may take years to rebuild confidence. Mr. Close added that it would now be more difficult for the SDLP and the Ulster Unionists to deal, because each would be looking over their shoulders.
19. The Taoiseach accepted that on a rational assessment the SDLP might be seen as going down the tubes. But if they could make a deal with the UUP, might not this change the focus of the electorate's attention? If we were to lose the SDLP, where would be able to go? Dr. Alderdice agreed fully as to the dire consequences of such a development. It could also pose great risks for the South, from a retaliatory Loyalist bombing campaign. The UK was a large State with a correspondingly large exchequer and can absorb the costs of bombs such as caused by those at the Baltic Exchange or in Manchester. Ireland was a much smaller State and thus much less in a position to bear the costs of bombings in Southern cities. If more highly skilled or qualified people were to lend their skills to the Loyalist bombmakers, the consequences could be horrendous. It should not be forgotten that a large workforce in East Belfast was engaged in the manufacture of guided missiles at Short Bros..
20. Mr. Close emphasised the need to get the British to understand the gravity and the urgency of the situation. David Cooney commented that the British do see the need to get the SDLP and the UUP working together. Dr. Alderdice expressed concern that the British Government would feel that they had been burnt by what happened in the summer and that this would influence them to hold back from decisive action.
21. The Taoiseach asked was there anything the Government could usefully say or do, in addition to persuading the SDLP? He would be prepared for the Government to again underline that it was not trying to engineer a takeover of the North by the South, that we were not part of a big nationalist juggernaut. We had said this again and again. Dr. Alderdice said that he was unable to identify any broad leap that would help the situation.

22. The Taoiseach asked what did Alliance think about ideas of the two Governments imposing some settlement if the talks break down. Mr. Close said that the Framework Document was seen on the unionist side as having too green a tinge. An improved solution might be seen as even greener. The question arose as to whether action in regard to Articles 2 and 3 would help. It had to be said, however, that these have not been raised much very recently by unionists. The Taoiseach doubted whether this was a useful card in a situation that was bad and might be deteriorating. The lead time for a constitutional amendment was so long and the test so hard, in that it had to be approved in a referendum by the people, who would be affected by the context.
23. Dr. Alderdice thought that the focus should be more on changing the agenda. There was a need to get the thought out of people's heads that meaningful talks could not take place unless Sinn Féin were participating in them.
24. 
25. The Taoiseach said that he had been very struck by what had been said. It made him return to the question: what would one do if one wanted to act on a changed analysis? The question arises as to whether there is some centre remaining or had the sands run out on it? It was not possible to frog-march the SDLP into a deal with the UUP. Dr. Alderdice responded that the Irish Government had to say to John Hume: get a grip and realise that you have had the wrong analysis which has misled you as to the appropriate action to take. The Taoiseach queried the utility of this approach. At John Hume's age now, he was not going to come up with a new project.

26. The Taoiseach again expressed his doubts about the suggestion made by Dr. Alderdice. Five years ago, if the SDLP had to choose between the Irish Government and Sinn Féin they would have chosen the Irish Government without hesitation. He was not so sure of the choice they would make now. In this State, any approach involving parting company from John Hume would have a big questionmark over it. A lot of people thought the world of him.
27. Mr. McBride advised looking at the possibility of small, piecemeal steps or small building blocks that would help to improve the climate.
28. The Taoiseach posed the question as to whether one needed to create a new fait accompli? But for this, the Government would have to change its policy. Mr. Close emphasised the importance of cycles and of turning points in the affairs of the North. If one does not act at a particular moment, there is a risk of matters drifting out of control and spiralling downhill. The Taoiseach and Dr. Alderdice agreed that a further, purely tactical ceasefire by the IRA would drive the unionists mad.
29. The meeting terminated at this point. The Taoiseach subsequently joined those present for dinner. At the dinner, the Alliance Party strongly pressed the point that if John Hume were to be a block in the way of a deal being done between the SDLP and the UUP, a deal that would otherwise be possible, respect for the past contribution of one man should not be allowed to stand in the way of reaching an agreement on which the whole future of Ireland, North and South, could depend.


W. Kirwan,
Assistant Secretary,
13 September, 1996