

Meeting between Tánaiste and Alliance Party

Dublin, 3 April 1996


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PST, PSS, S/S Ó hUiginn,
Counsellors A-I, Section,
Messrs Teahon, Donlon,
~~Murray~~ & Dalton,
Ambassadors London &
Washington, Joint Secretary

1. The meeting, which was held in Iveagh House, lasted a little under one hour. The Tánaiste was accompanied by Seán O hUiginn, David Donoghue, David Cooney and Rory Montgomery. The Alliance Party delegation consisted of John Alderdice, Steve McBride and Eileen Bell.
2. Dr Alderdice said that the British Government's decision not to employ the PR-STV system of elections had inevitably led to the present confusion about the details of what was proposed, and about the designation of specified parties to contest the elections. He and Ms Bell referred to the possible role Robert McCartney would play in the election and subsequently: Ms Bell referred to strong rumours that David Trimble was seeking his return to the UUP fold.
3. Moving on to the prospects for all-party negotiations, Dr Alderdice thought that elements within Sinn Féin seemed resigned to there being no formal resumption of the ceasefire for the time being. If in consequence they were absent from negotiations, what did this mean for the treatment of decommissioning?
4. The Tánaiste felt that decommissioning could not in that case be seriously addressed by the loyalists. He was unsure as to what call the republican movement would make. Ultimately the decisions were not made by those with whom the Government remained in contact. The key question for the Government, in its efforts to encourage a restoration of the ceasefire, was how to ensure that the negotiations would be serious and meaningful. He pointed to the passage of the electoral legislation through Westminster, and to the elections themselves, as possible periods of difficulty, which could add to the difficulties faced by the negotiations. Above all, parties had to demonstrate a serious determination to negotiate and to prove that they were "for real": it was the absence of any such sense that made David Trimble's recent statements so worrying.
5. Dr Alderdice felt that there were elements within all parties who wished to make a deal - he was not sure Trimble was among them. His personal view was that the negotiations would not result in agreement, but would be more in the nature of a lengthy consultation exercise by the Governments, which would ultimately have to make decisions and put them to the people. The absence of Sinn Féin would certainly make the SDLP more strident.

6. The Tánaiste remarked that the problem of guarding flanks affected both sides: the UUP's freedom to move was constrained by the presence of the DUP. If the two Governments were to act directly, there would be huge difficulties with the unionists - but perhaps it might be easier to go to the people after negotiations.
7. Dr Alderdice reiterated his personal expectation that Sinn Féin would not be in negotiations on 10 June. In that case, a way would have to be found of bringing them in later on. He hoped that they could in the interim use the breathing space to "bring their people along" with them - which some elements, such as Tom Hartley and Pat McGeown, realised they had not done as well as they should. He agreed with the Tánaiste that the British, too, could have done more, especially on issues like prisoners, but wondered if for some parts of the republican movement their difficulty was less with the process than with the unsatisfactory outcome they had come to realise was the best they would get..
8. Mr O hUiginn thought that the political leadership were essentially willing to settle for a level playing field between the two communities, and for equality between the two aspirations. The decommissioning issue had taken the initiative away from the politicians and had returned it to the military wing. It was essential that decommissioning not be allowed to wreck the negotiations - how it was to be handled had now to be clarified. That meant, in essence, whether the rest of the agenda could be addressed before David Trimble was satisfied on decommissioning? The answer - whether yes, no or maybe - had to be worked out now, before 10 June. We could not allow ourselves to get into a situation where we "marched people up the hill on 10 June and marched them down again on 11 June."
9. Dr Alderdice agreed that the matter had to be sorted out in advance. His preference, which he realised was now unrealisable, would have been to have it off the agenda altogether. Now it had to be addressed at the beginning- but in his view, got out of the way immediately thereafter. Was it possible to dislocate the political talks and discussion of decommissioning? The two Governments could present the parties with an international body which would consider the issue concurrently with the political negotiations. He did not envisage that the two would relate to one another like the "rungs of a ladder", but there would be a general parallelism.
10. The DUP was also of this opinion, according to Dr Alderdice - because they realised that if decommissioning were a central part of the political agenda they would have to "jump up and

down" about it. He feared that the UUP still sought an intimate linkage, and cautioned that McCartney could be even more difficult.

11. The Tánaiste indicated that the Government was seeking to achieve a clear understanding on the matter with the British. Dr Alderdice said that if this were not done, Day 1 of negotiations would be a fiasco and there would be no Day 2. He asked what the Government had in mind.
12. The Tánaiste said that in essence the two Governments had to agree what they meant by "addressing" decommissioning. At the same time, there needed to be leadership on both sides. They had to show that they had a real interest in reconciliation. Dr Alderdice could fully understand nationalist fears regarding Trimble. At the same time, Unionists saw Hume and the SDLP perhaps refusing to enter the Forum. There was a risk of a game of tit-for-tat. Both sides seemed to want to stand off.
13. Mr O hUiginn underscored the concern felt at the UUP's stance. At the recent meeting with the Government, they had seemed to contemplate with equanimity the possibility that setting the decommissioning hurdle too high would result in a failure to restore the ceasefire. It seemed that they wished to avoid an inclusive process - perhaps even a process at all. Dr Alderdice added that the main Unionist parties also wanted to keep out, indeed to destroy, the loyalists.
14. The Tánaiste reiterated the Government's determination to reach an understanding on the treatment of decommissioning - perhaps in a body- and thus to enable the negotiations to progress from the opening session on to the political agenda. Dr Alderdice felt it likely that Trimble would try to block the negotiations in the way we feared. It was grasping at straws to expect him to be reasonable - now or then. If he did fulfil these expectations, the rest of the parties would need to make clear their determination to press on, and should reach a prior understanding to that end. He agreed with Mr O hUiginn that no side should be permitted to veto the other side's agenda. While he could see no leverage which might be exerted upon David Trimble before 10 June to secure such a commitment from him, he expressed a willingness to do all he could to ensure that in practice he could not sustain a veto.


Rory Montgomery

4 April 1996.