

28/22 OCT 96

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FROM: QUENTIN THOMAS
Political Director
9 October 1996

cc	PS/Secretary of State	- B
	PS/Michael Ancram	- B
	PS/PUS	- B
	PS/Sir David Fell	- B
	Mr Steele	- B
	Mr Bell	- B
	Mr Watkins	- B
	Mr Ray	- B
	Mr Hill	- B
	Mr Lavery	- B
	Mr Maccabe	- B
	Mr Lamont, RID	- B
	Mr Beeton	- B
	Mr Perry	- B
	HMA Dublin	- B
	Mr Campbell-Bannerman	- B

Mr Stephens

SINN FEIN'S ENTRY AND THE DECOMMISSIONING IMPASSE

Following the meeting we had with the Irish Side yesterday, Mr O'hUiginn sought a further word a deux. He wanted to touch base before departing for Dublin, partly to play a part in preparing for a Dail debate tomorrow.

Parking Decommissioning

2. He reverted to our discussion yesterday about finding some way to park the decommissioning issue against the possibility that Sinn Fein might never join the process. He largely repeated what he had said yesterday. He noted that the SDLP had reported that in their meeting with the UUP yesterday the UUP had shown considerable interest in the two Governments' joint paper suggesting the Conclusions on Decommissioning. The SDLP had explained that that paper in effect was close to their own bottom line on decommissioning. The degree of interest shown in all this by the UUP led the SDLP and the Irish Side to hope that perhaps the UUP could be brought closer to that kind of outcome. I expressed scepticism.

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3. Mr O'hUiginn went on to say that if decommissioning could be parked on anything like the basis of a Conclusions paper - that is to say that if Sinn Fein did come in we would then aim to proceed as indicated in that paper - then parking decommissioning would have some attractions. I laughingly acknowledged that of course it would be acceptable to park decommissioning on our own terms. But if we were parking decommissioning because there was an impasse on it we could not pretend that we had agreed it in the way that the two Governments had hoped. Mr O'hUiginn acknowledged that this was so. He then fell back on repeating his formula that it would be difficult to park decommissioning with Mr Trimble having the key.

Condition for Sinn Fein's Entry

4. Mr O'hUiginn went on to think aloud about whether we could give any comfort to the UUP by explaining a little more clearly what would happen if there were a ceasefire. He wondered if we should say to the UUP that there might need to be a period of, say, four to six weeks while their seriousness was tested. He suggested that in that period the Irish Government might meet Sinn Fein to question and probe them. At the end of the period, if satisfied, the Irish Side would in effect certify that they deserved entry in the process.

5. Mr O'hUiginn also suggested that on this scenario the talks might need in some way to be put on hold while Sinn Fein's bona fide was established. He thought one way of achieving this, or perhaps of achieving a soft entry into the process for Sinn Fein at the end of the four to six week period, was to use Strand Three to provide cover. Strand Three could be controlled by the two Governments, but it would allow for consultations by the Governments with other parties. He thought it could provide a framework for "variable geometry": thus avoiding having to confront Unionists too early with the question whether they would enter the same room as Sinn Fein.

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6. In answer to my questions it became clear that Mr O'hUiginn was thinking in terms of a private understanding about these matters between HMG and the UUP. I said that I did not think that would work, or would be right. For one thing, we had to assume that any private understanding with the UUP would become public. For another, it was important that we had a clear and transparent position so that Sinn Fein could understand what was involved, so that there could not be subsequent misunderstandings or accusations of bad faith. Mr O'hUiginn appeared to acknowledge this.

7. Speaking candidly Mr O'hUiginn acknowledged that Mr Bruton's own instincts were to "slam the door" on Sinn Fein. I emphasised the need for both sides to keep closely in touch. It would be awkward for us if the Taoiseach adopted a more forward position than HMG. Mr O'hUiginn readily acknowledged that. It may be that the idea he has begun to formulate is designed, among other things, to manage the Taoiseach's disgust with Sinn Fein into controllable channels.

8. I emphasised that all of these ideas seem to me very interesting and likely to help us in providing reassurance to the Unionists about the scenario that Sinn Fein might declare a ceasefire.

Prospects for a Ceasefire

9. On the wider picture of Sinn Fein's intentions Mr O'hUiginn repeated that they did not feel well sighted. In some ways they were "out of the loop" of contacts with Sinn Fein. But he understood that the leadership (Adams/McGuinness) were still working to bring the movement in, or at least said that they were. In that context he could understand that, from their mind-set, having been blocked in England they might well have decided to allow some terrorism in Northern Ireland so that they went out with a bang, not a whimper. From that perspective he thought that the next bomb, if there were one, would be more significant than the one at Lisburn.

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That is because he would see the next bomb as indicating that it was not a signing-off explosion but the launch of a new phase of the campaign. I said that, while I clearly understood the possible distinction between signing-off explosions and ones to launch a new campaign, I was not sure myself that it turned on the issue whether there was a single bomb. The Provisionals might decide to have a limited number before stopping, if that is what they intended to do. We both noted that while from their cynical perspective all this might make sense, it fatally underestimated the political impact that any terrorist action necessarily had.

10. During our discussion we received the welcome news that the UUP and the SDLP had agreed, add referendum, a text for a the agenda for the remainder of the open plenary!

(Signed)

QUENTIN THOMAS

Political Director