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FROM C G MACCABE  
POLITICAL AFFAIRS DIVISION  
28 May 1997

cc PS/Mr Ingram (B&L) - O  
PS/Mr Murphy (B&L) - O  
PS/PUS (B&L) - O  
PS/Sir David Fell - O  
Mr Thomas - O  
Mr Steele - O  
Mr Ray  
Mr Bell - O  
Mr Stephens - O  
Mr Leach - O  
Mr Watkins - O  
Mr Hill - O  
Mr Brooker - O  
Mr Perry - O  
Mr Beeton - O  
Mr Lavery - O  
Mr Warner - O  
Mr Holmes, No 10  
Mr Budd, CO  
Mr Lamont, RID  
HMA, Dublin

File  
10/6

PS/Secretary of State (B&L)- O

**MEETING BETWEEN SINN FEIN AND NIO OFFICIALS - WEDNESDAY  
28 MAY 1997**

Today's meeting with Sinn Fein began at 12.10 pm and ended at 3.20 pm. Once again it was held in Stormont Castle and Sinn Fein were represented by Martin McGuinness, Gerry Kelly, Caoimhghin o Caolain and Siobhan O'Hanlon. Quentin Thomas, Jonathan Stephens and I comprised the Government team.

**Summary**

2. This was a less fruitful meeting than that on 21 May. Although the Sinn Fein delegation were reasonably friendly, the delivery and demeanour of Mr McGuinness - who did most of the talking - were reminiscent of Exploratory

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Dialogue. Sinn Fein laboured a lot of points. As at our first meeting, discussion centred on confidence-building measures, decommissioning, a timeframe for Talks, and Sinn Fein's entry into them. Despite repeated assurances of the Government's wish to see them included in negotiations as quickly as possible after the unequivocal restoration of the IRA ceasefire, and helpful description of how we saw things proceeding after a ceasefire, Sinn Fein expressed dissatisfaction and disappointment. They had come expecting us to put flesh on the bones of our earlier remarks about their four principal areas of concern, and complained repeatedly that we had failed to do so. We defended our position in robust terms and the meeting ended with both sides agreeing to reflect on what had been said. Sinn Fein are to come back to us about a further meeting - subject to events on the ground - at the end of next week.

## Detail

3. Welcoming Sinn Fein, Mr Thomas said he was glad events on the ground had made the meeting possible. Mr McGuinness reciprocated. He said the Secretary of State's recent trip to the United States had generated a lot of optimism, but while style was important, the substance behind it was much more so. Substance was what they wanted to hear from us.
4. Mr Thomas asked what Sinn Fein saw as the end product of our meetings. Was it an outcome where Gerry Adams was able to present an analysis to the IRA that would bring about another ceasefire? Was it enough to hear explanations of our position across the table, or would some text or a Ministerial speech be more helpful? Mr McGuinness did not offer an opinion. What Sinn Fein wanted, he said, was real, meaningful and inclusive peace negotiations alongside substantial confidence-building measures. This was, however, without prejudice to Sinn Fein's absolute right to equality of treatment with other political parties. It could not be otherwise as their electoral mandate was now 45% of the Nationalist vote. No matter how much others wished it were not so, there was no hope of the peace train reaching its destination without them. In Sinn Fein's opinion, this destination was

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an end to British jurisdiction in Ireland, and national self-determination by all the people of the island. Sinn Fein needed to be convinced that meaningful negotiations were on offer; if they were they would go to the IRA and present an analysis that would hopefully lead to the end of violence. We said we believed such negotiations were on offer - following a ceasefire - and had no intention of extending the series of meetings any longer than absolutely necessary to do the business. As regards a timeframe for Talks, we confirmed that both the British and Irish Governments did not see a problem with regular reviews of progress, probably every three months. Sinn Fein appeared to be satisfied with this, although they insisted that the Talks should be limited to six months rather than ending in May 1998, as we had said they would at the earlier meeting. Moreover, they needed to be certain that both Governments would "move decisively" against any party that was deliberately stalling.

5. Mr Thomas said he thought it was common ground between us that a way had to be found to bring the bulk of Unionists and the bulk of Nationalists into the project. Ideally, the vexed question of decommissioning could be dealt with satisfactorily to allow entry into the meat of the three strands before the Summer break, but if this proved impossible we might have to seek another way forward. Mr McGuinness looked unimpressed and suggested moving the discussion on to confidence-building measures.

6. We were reminded of the areas of most concern to Sinn Fein and Nationalists at large, namely equality of opportunity in economic, social and cultural affairs, democratic rights, parity of esteem, demilitarisation, prisoners, policing and emergency legislation. We were asked for details of initiatives we were prepared to take in these areas. For their part, Sinn Fein would return with a more specific list in due course, but they wanted to raise some prisoner issues right away.

7. Mr Thomas said it was **not** appropriate to get into this sort of detail now. That was for the Talks. Mr McGuinness replied testily that it probably did not

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matter one way or the other, as we were well aware of the issues. Confidence-building measures were fundamental to the process, and could be dealt with outside the Talks. They were in a class of their own. The Government should formally recognise that fundamental, political and constitutional change had to take place. We reminded Sinn Fein that they had not answered our question about whether some text or a Ministerial speech might be helpful. For example, at some stage, the Government might state that the process we were involved in had the capacity to deliver historic change. Mr McGuinness appeared to signify assent. We said the Government were committed to change and cited "Frameworks" as proof of our intent. We said that we had also signalled our commitment to pressing on with the search for agreement, even though the current process failed to deliver. And in the meantime that we would continue to introduce confidence-building measures that would meet the aspirations of both communities.

8. Mr McGuinness said he hoped Sinn Fein would soon be invited to sit down with the **political** representatives of the Government. Mr Thomas said that normalisation of relationships with Ministers could only begin after an unequivocal restoration of the IRA ceasefire. After further complaints by Mr McGuinness and Mr Kelly about the treatment of IRA prisoners in Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Mr Thomas repeated that while it was the Government's intention to go on looking at confidence-building measures, he could give no commitment to come forward with a programme of reforms as a result of **this** series of meetings. Mr McGuinness said he was profoundly disappointed. Queen's Speeches were all very well, but vague promises in them meant nothing to the people of Crossmaglen or Coalisland. **They** did not think **they** were on the threshold of significant changes to their lives. At that point he suggested, abruptly, moving on to decommissioning.

9. We reminded Sinn Fein that both the British and Irish Governments were committed to implementation of the Mitchell report in all respects, but in a way that did not block progress in the Talks. We asked them how they imagined decommissioning might be played in a situation where the Talks had moved into the three strands, and seemed to be heading for a satisfactory conclusion.

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Mr McGuinness ducked the question and fell back on Sinn Fein's traditional position: they have always wanted to see the removal of all guns from Ireland, but decommissioning must not be allowed to block the negotiations. He added that they had come to the meeting expecting to hear how we planned to get everyone over the hurdle.

10. Mr Kelly said it was not a matter for Sinn Fein, but for the British and Irish Governments. We explained that both Governments were working together, and neither were expecting prior decommissioning or a schedule of instalments. But Mitchell did embrace the concept of a **dynamic** process. Mr McGuinness said it sounded to him as if we were just moving decommissioning down the road a bit, delaying the crunch as it were. Mr Thomas repeated that together with the Irish, we would do our best, but success could not be guaranteed. Sinn Fein kept pressing for a definitive answer and seemed keen to know if we were prepared to proceed in the absence of sufficient consensus.

11. After some circular discussion, during which we reminded the delegation that Unionists were fearful of finding themselves negotiating with Sinn Fein in the three strands when decommissioning turning out to be illusory, this part of the meeting ended with Mr McGuinness demanding that the Government disabuse David Trimble and the UUP of the notion that they could "strangle" the process. The meeting broke for lunch at 1.35 pm and resumed again at 2.05 pm.

12. Mr McGuinness opened by demanding Sinn Fein's immediate entry into Talks, following an unequivocal restoration of the IRA ceasefire. He went on to ask how the General Election in the Irish Republic was affecting the process. We did our best to allay his apparent concern that developments in the Republic following the Election may delay or derail the train. As further reassurance, Mr Thomas explained what would probably happen following restoration of the ceasefire. First, some time would be needed to see if the IRA's words and deeds were consistent; the absence of pre-ceasefire activity would be relevant here. The Secretary of State would then make a political judgement in all the circumstances in

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the round, and there would be no unnecessary delay. What others, including the Unionist parties, thought would be immaterial.

13. He continued that it was likely that the imminent arrival of Sinn Fein at the Talks table would induce paralysis in some of the other participants, and in anticipation of this the Governments might invite Senator Mitchell to propose an adjournment. More or less in parallel, Ministers would want to meet Sinn Fein to explore their position on various issues and other parties might want to engage in bi-lateral and tri-lateral meetings with them. During this period, the Party would be invited to take up rooms in Castle Buildings. All being well, in accordance with the law, they would be invited join the Talks process. A lot of thought was going into preparing the way for Sinn Fein's entry into the Talks and in the right circumstances we would not be found wanting. Mr McGuinness' grudging reply was that this could last for years. Mr Thomas said this was nonsense and that he would try to give a more specific indication of the likely timescale at any subsequent meeting. He repeated that Ministers wanted Sinn Fein in the process because it was in their interest to have them in. He could envisage a Government statement saying that on X date, if certain conditions were met, Sinn Fein could be in the Talks by Y date. Mr McGuinness said this would be helpful, but added the now familiar rider about Sinn Fein's inalienable right to be in Talks immediately after a ceasefire, without preconditions. Mr Thomas again asked if Sinn Fein would see advantage in having something written down. Mr McGuinness said that he would like to have a full and comprehensive description of how the Government were going to deal with the four issues of principal concern to them. There had been a distinct lack of substance in both meetings and this caused difficulties for the delegation. Mr Thomas reminded Sinn Fein that the purpose of the meetings was to ensure the Government's position was clearly understood, and challenged the assertion that the meetings had been without substance. He said several of the things Sinn Fein had been told were very helpful to them: it would be very helpful to us if they were willing to reply in kind. During an extended exchange in this vein, Mr Thomas stressed that:

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- we looked forward to all inclusive, meaningful negotiations and that we had made it pretty clear what timetable we envisaged;
- we were working with the Irish Government to find a solution to decommissioning;
- we had set out clearly the sequence of events we envisaged following an unequivocal restoration of the IRA ceasefire;
- we had noted everything Sinn Fein had to say about confidence-building measures and had had some useful things to say in response.

14. Mr Thomas continued to press for some indication of how close, or far apart, Sinn Fein thought they and we were. He needed to be able to tell Ministers that the gap was bridgeable, and what was needed to fill it. Mr McGuinness replied that they had heard very little about confidence-buildings measures, especially prisoners; that they had noted that we did not expect the Talks to run beyond May 1998; and on decommissioning that they had sensed the UUP might have a veto on the basis of "sufficient consensus". Mr Thomas said that in this respect, everyone had a veto. Mr McGuinness complained that despite the potentially helpful idea that the two Governments would work together to drive the process forward, "consent" and "sufficient consensus" kept cropping up. "Let's be serious", he said, "decommissioning has strangled the Talks. Sooner or later the two Governments will have to drive the process forward". Mr Thomas repeated that, **without sufficient consensus** the Governments could not force something through in the face of UUP dissent. If Sinn Fein wanted a categorical assurance that decommissioning would not be an impediment they could not have it. Changing tack slightly, Sinn Fein said they sensed the period between the declaration of a ceasefire and their entry could be described as yet another period of "decontamination". Mr Thomas denied this and asked again for Sinn Fein's assessment of how far apart our two sides were. Mr McGuinness responded by summarising the criticisms of the inadequacy of our responses he had already made. He again asked for an

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adjournment which lasted from 2.43 pm until 3.13 pm. On Sinn Fein's return, Mr McGuinness said that the delegation were very disappointed with the meeting. It was absolutely essential to have clarity on all the issues they had raised. They needed meat on the bones. The Government must face up to their responsibilities in the four main areas of concern to Sinn Fein so that they would have "some evidence that meaningful negotiations were on offer". They had heard nothing that provided them with any consolation.

15. Mr Thomas said he was very disappointed that Sinn Fein were disappointed. He reminded the delegation of the Hume/Adams document of 10 October 1996 which John Hume had said was a firm platform for movement by the IRA. He argued that on three of the four matters of concern to Sinn Fein - the fourth being a certain date for entry into Talks - we had been more forward than the 10 October document had required. And even on a date for entry, we had indicated the Government's preparedness, in principle, for rapid progress. In view of this, he wondered if Sinn Fein were serious about their commitment to peace and their professed desire to enter into Talks.

16. Sinn Fein seemed rather shaken by this, but quickly regained their composure. Mr McGuinness said again that our responses had been inadequate and did not convince the delegation that a credible and meaningful process was on offer. From what they had heard, they were doubtful if the Government really were prepared to offer Sinn Fein parity of esteem or to recognise their mandate. Nevertheless, all was not lost and they would continue to seek a way forward with the British and Irish Governments. Apparently feeling the need to have the last word, Mr McGuinness said he wanted to put on record Sinn Fein's requirement for a six months' limit on the Talks; his concern that we accepted David Trimble and the UUP had a veto on progress; and the delegation's interpretation of our remarks about Sinn Fein's entry to Talks after a ceasefire to mean that they would have to undergo a decontamination period. Mr Thomas said he disagreed with the last two points.

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17. The meeting ended with a brief discussion of each side's proposed, and bland, press lines; and agreement to meet again on a date to be arranged after the Sinn Fein delegation returned from South Africa at the end of next week, subject as always to events on the ground.

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