

17 Jun. 1997 14:39

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No. 6331...-P. 4/7

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FROM: R I Clarke
British Embassy
DUBLIN

DATE: 16 June 1997

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Mr Watkins
Mr Bell
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Mr Brooker
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Mr Thomas

CALL ON MARTIN MANSERGH

1. I called on Martin Mansergh today. He is now on the last lap of the platform discussion with the PDs (which he characterised as "less a negotiation, more a crossing of Ts and dotting of i's").

2. Our conversation was exclusively about the "peace process". It preceded the murder of the two RUC officers in Lurgan (which may undermine some of Mansergh's more optimistic statements). Mansergh made five main points:

- we should wait until Ahern took office before finalising a paper on decommissioning (the outstanding problem issue);
- we should do likewise before going public on the text handed to Sinn Fein;
- a ceasefire would, he hoped, be called in the "seven to ten days" after Ahern became Taoiseach;

CONFIDENTIAL

17 Jun. 1997 14:39

S OF S PRIVATE OFFICE 1712106722

No. 6331 P. 5/7

CONFIDENTIAL

- Ahern was prepared to be tough with Sinn Fein. But he was unlikely to sign up to anything which resembled a "sealed train";

- Ahern would be looking for an early Summit with the Prime Minister;

3. The detail was as follows:

Prospects

- Mansergh's overall assessment was that "things were moving in the right direction". He hoped that a ceasefire would be called within a week to ten days of Ahern taking office (ie the first half of July). I asked him how he read the abandoned IED and the attempted shooting in Derry; he said he had no hard information; the incidents might be related to the pace of the talks with British officials;

Contacts with Sinn Fein

- Fianna Fail (ie Mansergh) were in close touch with Sinn Fein. Contacts over the weekend had confirmed receipt of the British Government text. Mansergh denied (uncomfortably I thought) that the Ahern/Adams meetings had been fixed for today (as we have been informed by other contacts). But it would take place before 26 June.

- The British text for Sinn Fein did not, in his opinion, give rise to insurmountable problems. The key to success would lie in reassuring Sinn Fein as to the trueness of the intentions behind the words. The signals that had come from the new British Government - eg on timescale and decommissioning - had been helpful.

- On the detail of the text, he thought that the six week period could be finessed. The new Irish Government might well resuscitate the Forum; this would keep things ticking over in the summer recess. On timescale May 1998 was now in the public domain (and was, he thought, acceptable). On CBMs there was not much more that either Government could offer in advance of a ceasefire; he anticipated that the prospective Irish Government would embark on a two/three year release programme of IRA prisoners in the Republic, excepting those convicted of "recent lethal" or high profile attacks (eg Shankill bomber types). Even then, there were fewer IRA prisoners to release than there had been in say 1992 or 1994. Decommissioning, however, was a real concern.

CONFIDENTIAL

17: Jun. 1997 14:39

S OF S PRIVATE OFFICE 1712106722

No. 6331 P. 6/7

CONFIDENTIAL

Decommissioning

- His first message was on handling of the draft joint text. He confirmed the procedures for agreeing texts in the transition period (as reported by the Ambassador), which amount to a nil obstat at best. Our latest draft decommissioning paper seemed to him to be on the right lines. But the incoming administration would not want any paper to be agreed or tabled before 26 June. He recalled the Prior initiative of 1982, which had been launched in the three week interregnum between the Irish election and the vote on the new Taoiseach. This had caused a serious breach between London and Dublin which had taken time to repair. While parallels were not in any sense exact (with the two Governments now much closer on substance and tactics) Ahern would want to be Taoiseach before there was any deal on decommissioning;

- Mansergh then moved on to Sinn Fein fears of a pre-negotiation on decommissioning between a ceasefire and entry into talks. We had to avoid this trap at all costs, even though there would be many (Unionists) pushing for clarification during the recess period post-ceasefire.

- Finally he went on to his old hobby horse of avoidance of frontloading. He had been struck by the recent statement by the Northern Ireland Secretary where the emphasis had been more on back-loading. We had to realise that the IRA would not decommission seriously before a political settlement had been reached. He conceded the difficulty this presented. But in a Utopian world (sic), the Unionists must realise that they had a lock on decommissioning by virtue of their withholding agreement (comment; he said agreement, not progress) on a political package.

Public handling of the British text

- He asked whether the text handed over to Sinn Fein would be made public. I said that would probably depend on the response. Again Mansergh urged caution; going public before Ahern took power would cause them difficulties. He then speculated that the ceasefire, if it came, might well be couched in more forward terms than that of August 1994. But in order to achieve this, we had to avoid ultimata. Sinn Fein would not do business under threat any more than we would. For his part, Ahern would be tough on Sinn Fein. He would be willing to say that the talks should get down to serious work in September "whoever was there". But he was unlikely to sign up to anything that resembled a "sealed train". We had to leave open a means of getting back onto a "moving train". We probably wouldn't need it. But it had to be there.

CONFIDENTIAL

17 Jun. 1997 14:40

S OF S PRIVATE OFFICE 1712106722

No. 6331 P. 7/7

CONFIDENTIAL

British/Irish Summit

- Mansergh concluded by saying that Ahern would be looking for an early Summit after taking power ("in the first few days", on the lines of Reynolds and Bruton). This would wrap up the joint approach on decommissioning, compare notes on the peace process, and discuss Drumcree;

4. Mansergh confirmed that he will be seeing Sir John Chilcot in London on 19 June.

(Signed)
R I Clarke

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