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MEETING WITH SINN FEIN: WEDNESDAY 6 AUGUST 1997

The Secretary of State met a delegation from Sinn Fein in Castle Buildings on 6 August. This was Sinn Fein's first meeting with Ministers in the new Government and followed the announcement on 19 July that the IRA was restoring its ceasefire. The Secretary of State was accompanied by the Mr Murphy, Mr Thomas, Mr Leach, Mr Maccabe and Mr Brooker. The Sinn Fein delegation was led by Gerry Adams and also comprised Martin McGuinness, Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin TD, Mairtín Ferris, Lucilita Bhreatnach and Siobhan O Hanlon.

2. The meeting began at 11 o'clock. The two sides shook hands as Sinn Fein arrived in the room. Pleasantries were exchanged over coffee and this set a generally relaxed and non-confrontational tone which carried on throughout the meeting. During the preliminaries Siobhan O Hanlon handed round copies of a Sinn Fein paper "Peace in Ireland - an agenda for change", which is being circulated separately.

3. Dr Mowlam opened by welcoming the delegation. The meeting had been made possible by the ceasefire. She wanted to see Sinn Fein move into inclusive talks. The fact that that could happen showed the significance of the ceasefire. She acknowledged the efforts of Sinn Fein and others that had made the ceasefire possible. Up to now the quality of the ceasefire had been good; she looked forward to that continuing. If it did, the way would be open for Sinn Fein to move into inclusive talks. The ball was in their court; they could make it easier or harder for her to take the necessary decision. She hoped that events would go well in Derry at the weekend; prospects were looking better. Sinn Fein could help.

4. The Secretary of State continued that since it had come into office the Government had set out to be honest and direct. It had not said anything privately that it had not then said publicly. Sinn Fein had evidence of that in the Aide Memoire. The Government would not be posing any new tests or hurdles for Sinn Fein. As of now, her immediate political objectives were to get agreement to the joint decommissioning paper and to launch the political negotiations on 15 September. The Government continued to stand ⁶³over the Joint Decommissioning document. Further discussions were needed to try to get final agreement on it. Talks would start in September and run through to May next year. The Government would have ideological and other differences with Sinn Fein which would be apparent during negotiations: we understood that. From

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the Government's point of view it would continue to be driven by the principles of consent, fairness, justice and equity of treatment.

5. Gerry Adams, after introducing his team (and Dr Mowlam introducing hers) reciprocated the Secretary of State's welcome. The welcome was "mutual". He then referred to Sinn Fein's electoral mandate. They were not the IRA. They could not have equality if their treatment was tied to the cessation of IRA violence. This caused hurt to their people. "Sinn Fein had buried more councillors than any other party"; it too had suffered from violence.

6. Adams acknowledged that talks worked best in a peaceful environment. Under the previous Government there had been three years of missed opportunities. The new cessation had created fresh momentum. Sinn Fein wanted to build on it and move into inclusive talks.

7. Adams said that he wanted the two sides "to get under each others skins". He wanted each to understand the other. He and his colleagues were Irish and Republicans; they had a right to self Government. They wanted the British Government to be part of the process, not facilitators or referees. The Government carried the baggage of being English, Welsh or whatever. Sinn Fein had its own baggage. Each needed to understand where the other was coming from. Ireland was divided against the wishes of the people. The Government had allowed the security agenda to dictate the pace for the past 25 years. Would the present Government fall back on the security agenda or treat Northern Ireland from a political perspective? We could not "go back to sad recycling of our history". Adams said that it was easy for the RUC to hack down the Garvaghy Road. But it caused deep hurt in the nationalist community. The security people needed to be fitted into the political agenda.

8. Adams raised the issue of equality. It had been mentioned in the Government of Ireland Act and all treaties since. But Irish language had no legal status. Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin and other members of his party were required to state their names in English but this would not happen if he were French or another nationality. Catholics were twice as likely as Protestants to be unemployed. Nationalist children could not be educated through the medium of the Irish language. Sinn Fein did not want to disempower unionists but to achieve equality through pluralism and diversity.

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9. Adams continued on the issue of demilitarisation. Despite the cessation the army was still patrolling heavily in Belfast. There were reports of harassment in rural areas. He did not want to go on with a list of complaints. But he could not stress enough that it had been "a huge mistake" when the Prime Minister had come to Belfast, a city in which Sinn Fein obtained more votes than any other party, and had said that there would not be a united Ireland in his lifetime. The alternative view had to be put. It was an issue of mutual respect. People needed to read themselves into the history and understand the legacy. Nationalists had worked with leaders of the Labour party; there was a plaque to Countess Markowicz in the Commons. There were good things but there was also a legacy of destruction. Republicans would take responsibility for their baggage; the Government had to take responsibility for its.

10. Adams moved on to ask about meetings with Ministers. Could Martin McGuinness meet Paul Murphy? The Secretary of State said that officials had already floated the idea of Mr Worthington meeting Sinn Fein to discuss Welfare to Work, and Paul Murphy meeting them on economic issues such as the Comprehensive Spending Review. The Secretary of State herself would be away on holiday from the end of the month. Adams mentioned that he had asked Gerry O'Hara to work up plans, with Lucilita Bhreatnach and Mitchell McLaughlin, for a series of meetings. Mr Murphy explained that he was on holiday from the end of the week but could have a meeting towards the end of August.

11. Picking up his opening remarks, Gerry Adams referred to the Sinn Fein paper circulated at the beginning of the meeting. It set out Sinn Fein's position on their entry into the negotiations. They had given something similar to Sir Patrick Mayhew in his time.

12. Adams emphasised that Sinn Fein wanted to put "the whole issue of Irish unity on the agenda". They would want a good discussion of it at some point. He would ask Miss O'Hanlon to make arrangements. His second concern was the need for progress to "consolidate the current situation". There had been "no change at all in the omni-presence of the army and RUC on the ground". The community needed to see changes following the ceasefire. There was also the issue of marches and prisoners. Opportunities had been missed under the previous Government. He recalled a remark by Sir Patrick Mayhew when he visited a North London school; it was the only time he could remember when the Government had referred to itself having a responsibility to help the Sinn

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Fein leadership. The same was true now. The Government needed to build confidence otherwise he (Adams) "will be walking the plank". The Secretary of State fully acknowledged the need for confidence building on all sides. This was a two-way process also involving Sinn Fein. She deplored recent sectarian attacks.

13. Lucilita Bhreatnach made a robust interjection about marches. The Government had a clear responsibility not to act just as referees. The issue was all about equality and respect. The Garvaghy Road was "a disgraceful example" of what should not be allowed to happen to peaceful demonstrators. The Government's stance had been unhelpful. It had allowed decisions to be taken on security rather than political grounds.

14. The Secretary of State said that the decision on the Garvaghy Road was not what she had wanted. She, the Parades Commission and others had worked hard to achieve a local accommodation. The issue was one of competing rights; the problem was striking a balance between the rights and responsibilities of the two sides. In the absence of a local accommodation there was bound to be a lot of anger and frustration when the decision was taken. The Government was working to try to ensure that events like this did not happen again. If the North Report had been implemented that could have helped; the Government was committed to implementation. It would not necessarily prevent another Drumcree but it could help to produce agreements.

15. Continuing, Dr Mowlam said that there had been a shift during the current marching season. Garvaghy had not been a positive outcome but the decision of the Loyalists on 12 July had helped to pull things back. The prospects in Dunloy and elsewhere were looking better.

16. Mr Thomas referred back to Gerry Adams reference to remarks by Sir Patrick Mayhew. What Sir Patrick had been saying was that up to that point HMG had essentially had a combative relationship with Sinn Fein; he had suggested that the time had come for that to change and that the Government had an interest in being more supportive of the Sinn Fein leadership. The leadership itself had talked of creating a "benign dynamic". Mr Thomas believed that the Secretary of State would, herself, support that proposition. Sinn Fein also had a responsibility to help it develop. The two sides had a shared interest. Sometimes combative positions were necessary but each needed to recognise the interests of the other.

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17. Gerry Adams returned to the issue of the Garvaghy Road. The nationalist population had seen this as a test of HMG; "you failed the test". Those who took up the security agenda needed to understand their responsibilities. There were 2549 Orange parades. He tolerated and upheld the loyalist's right to march. Allowing all these parades to go ahead was hardly a denial of loyalist rights. But what was required on the Garvaghy Road was a political decision; the Government could not "abdicate responsibility" to the army and RUC. The latter should be "kept out of the equation". They were not at fault if they were asked to clear the road; they were only doing what they were trained to do. South Africa - though not a direct comparison - offered some lessons. It was only when the South Africans had treated these as political, not security problems that they started to make progress. He was not trying to score points; they had had three years of that. Sinn Fein were sensitive to what happened to the unionist people; the unionists were worried about change. Change needed to be managed and negotiated. How could there be an excuse in the current circumstances for "saturation" patrolling by the security forces?

18. Dr Mowlam emphasised that she wanted to secure a clear political lead in decisions on parades. As for patrolling, the figures she had seen suggested that the numbers of patrols were well down in Belfast and Derry. Mr Leach emphasised that what Ministers had tried to do at Garvaghy was to create the space for a local accommodation. They had, however, run up against complete intransigence on both sides. The central issue was one of conflicting rights.

19. Martin McGuinness said that as far as the nationalist people were concerned the Government consistently failed to stand up to the Orange Order. There had to be change. Sinn Fein, the Unionists, all had to change - including, most importantly, the British Government. The Government's strategy had always been based on a security response to the "rebels"; these had to be political decisions. There had to be fundamental political and constitutional change. He quoted the experiences in two villages in his constituency of mid Ulster. Bellaghy was 90% nationalist and had 13 loyalist marches this year; Tobermore was 100% unionist but had only 3 marches. Getting heated, he asked "what does that tell you?" "That nationalists are expected to sit down and behave in their own community". (In a final aside, Mr McGuinness wished Dr Mowlam well both as regards her health and her job).

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20. Gerry Adams warmed to the theme. People regarded Sinn Fein as being in hock to terrorists. But he had been shot, had his house bombed and a brother-in-law shot dead by the army. Nevertheless he was prepared to talk to the people who had done these things. The people in the Garvaghy Road were prepared to talk. He rejected any notion that they were intransigent or were not good enough to talk to. People needed to change their mind sets, get talking and listen pro-actively. The RUC was "totally unacceptable". 10% of public employment was related to security; that all had to be dismantled. There had to be a proper police service under the peoples' control. The army - young men trained to react with speed and aggression, operating in what they saw as hostile areas - behaved the way they had been trained to behave. It was not their fault.

21. Mairtin Ferris talked of the need to consolidate the present situation. The sectarian nature of the RUC was a serious impediment. Many in his community had suffered violence, threats of violence and torture at the hands of the RUC. They were absolutely unacceptable and this needed to be addressed urgently out of respect for nationalists. There was also the issue of collusion, Brian Nelson, etc.

22. Dr Mowlam said that she was not going to get into the business of apportioning blame. She wanted to focus instead on the point that everyone had to change. She had said so herself. The Government was considering changes to the RUC though they may not be sufficient to satisfy Sinn Fein. The Government's first priorities in its early months were to get Sinn Fein into the talks and try to keep the unionists in. This would need continuing confidence building on both sides. Changes would happen over time.

23. Adams asked if the Government would implement the SACHR report on employment equality. Van Straubenzee had commissioned a similar report in the 1970s but it still had not been implemented. Dr Mowlam explained how the Government would respond. It was going through the report and would implement recommendations speedily where it could. Ministers were not procrastinating. The issues were tied in with TSN and PAFT; this all needed to be worked out.

24. Gerry Adams acknowledged the two objectives which the Secretary of State had explained. Sinn Fein too wanted to the unionists in the talks. Confidence building was not just about creating confidence in the two parts of the community but in the Government itself. The last Labour

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Government had been "disgraceful". The hunger strike arose out of the actions of a Labour Government. Mr Blair was seen as reinvigorating Government in the early months; Ministers had to keep the momentum going. He "did not want to be ungracious" but did the Secretary of State really think that the Northern Ireland people needed a British Secretary of State to govern them? The Northern Ireland people had the skills to sort out their problems themselves. "Most people want to see you being the last Secretary of State".

25. Paul Murphy said that there was no question but that Ministers were trying to work themselves out of a job. The real issue was what should be put in place of the present system. The previous Government had left a big deficit on the funding of schools and hospitals. There had been some alleviation in the Budget. It would be useful to discuss with Sinn Fein what they thought the Government's funding priorities should be. He believed most people in Northern Ireland would agree with the broad policies of the Government on hospital waiting lists, class sizes etc. But on Adams' central point he absolutely agreed that the present arrangement could be improved. But change had to happen in a way which was acceptable and would last. The Prime Minister remained very engaged.

26. Martin McGuinness agreed that hospital waiting lists, class sizes, etc were important issues. He would like to revisit these issues at some point. But the wider issue was that the Government had to change its whole approach to Northern Ireland. Ministers needed to take account of the deep hurt in the nationalist community over the British Government's handling of Northern Ireland over the past 70 years. He had been interested in the Minister's remarks on the radio that morning when he had referred to getting Government into the hands of local people. The framework documents, despite being produced by a Tory government, were an admission that the Northern Ireland state was a total failure, that partition was wrong. The fact that possibly 50,000 people had turned up at this year's Bloody Sunday commemoration was a reflection of a wide sense of hurt in the nationalist community. Not just about Bloody Sunday but about the wider treatment of the nationalist community. The people were hurt by the loyalists refusal to negotiate and the way the previous Government had obstructed the peace negotiations. Nationalists had seen "hundreds" of their people killed by the army and RUC but apart from Private Thain no soldier had been prosecuted. If the RUC had been an impartial force many soldiers would have been brought before the courts.

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"The amount of hurt and bitterness about this had to be seen to be believed".

27. McGuinness continued that Sinn Fein had made a determined attempt to bring about inclusive negotiations. There had been progress in South Africa and elsewhere; why not Northern Ireland? It had not happened because the Government and the Unionists had not wanted it to happen. They were dictated to by the militarists with a security agenda. The Government had to get to grips with that. "Change will be difficult for everybody, but change has to take place".

28. Dr Mowlam responded that the Government was looking seriously at the new material on Bloody Sunday provided by John Hume and the Irish Government. The process could not be rushed but she would want to act on it sooner rather than later. McGuinness replied that every dog in the street knew what had happened; "unadulterated murder and the British Army got away with it". Refusing to be drawn, Dr Mowlam agreed that in order to develop confidence change had to happen on a number of fronts. McGuinness said he had come to many meetings with the Government; some people would have given up in despair. What needed to happen was a "psychological connection between Gerry Adams and you", otherwise there could not be progress.

29. Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin raised the issue of prisoners. Sinn Fein appreciated the opportunity to visit the prisons in England - Bellmarsh and Whitemoor. He acknowledged the way that this had been facilitated by the Home Secretary. The whole area of prisons needed to be looked at. After the 1994 ceasefire the only person released by the British Government was Corporal Clegg. That sent out grievous signals. What were the Government's plans this time?

30. He continued that there were 26 Irish prisoners in English jails. Five had served 21 years or more. Fourteen were in SSUs (including people on remand). They were subject to closed visits and were not having visits from their families. The use of SSUs was condemned by human rights organisations. Irish prisoners were denied compassionate parole.

31. Commenting on these issues, Dr Mowlam confirmed that the situation in SSUs was under review following the ceasefire. HMG were also in contact with the Irish Government about their policy on releases following repatriation. It had now been agreed that McNulty could be transferred

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temporarily to Northern Ireland; Martin's case, which was new, was under consideration. Sinn Fein could therefore take it that the Government recognised the importance which Sinn Fein attached to the prisoner issues.

32. oCaoláin said that Sinn Fein wanted all Irish prisoners repatriated. He also asserted that women prisoners in Maghaberry were not being treated like their male counterparts in the prison or at Long Kesh. There were problems over lock-ups, telephones, confined exercise space and other issues. These needed to be addressed with some speed. He hoped the Secretary of State would take a personal interest. Dr Mowlam agreed to look into the issues.

33. Gerry Adams referred to the case of Paul Magee. He had not seen his family since August 1994.

He was not personalising the issue, just pointing out what conditions were like.

34. Dr Mowlam repeated that the issues would continue to be looked at. She understood the importance of prisoners to the movement. She expected changes though they may not always be as quick as Sinn Fein would want. McGuinness said that it would be a mistake for the Government to take a "minimalist approach". It was important for the Government to demonstrate that it was serious; this would have a big effect in the community. He did not want to forget the plight of Roisin McAliskey. The terms of her confinement imposed strains on her and her family. A lot of people were expecting the case against her to collapse at any moment through lack of evidence. It was "psychological torture". Dr Mowlam said she was well aware of the case. A lot had been done to make sure that her conditions were as comfortable as possible. Otherwise, she acknowledged McGuinness' point about minimalism. It was something that could be discussed further.

35. McGuinness recounted that the Irish Government had released prisoners after the last ceasefire; the British Government had not. Prisoners were "crucial". Nationalists saw their own people being put in jail while members of the police and army, who had killed members of their community, were still walking the streets. Sinn Fein had rekindled peoples' hopes of peace. But the people were being very cautious. The way to generate a dynamic was by being imaginative. Although Peter Brooke had talked of an imaginative response by the British Government, every government since then had shown a lack of imagination. Security advice

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PREM 49/115 Attachment to memo Brooker to SOS dated 07/08/97

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continued to "overwhelm" political instincts. oCaoláin emphasised that change must be speedy. Prisoners were an important part of the process. The Dublin Government had already indicated that they were willing to accommodate all that was required. Adams observed that, on the credit side, he recognised that the Government had wanted Sinn Fein in the talks and had moved speedily to do that.

36. Picking up this point, Dr Mowlam repeated that what drove her was the need to reach agreement on the joint decommissioning paper and to keep the Unionists in play. She did not want to give them any excuses to stay out. She was not giving them a veto - the talks would start on 15 September - but the unionists were far from in and the Government had to find a way of keeping them involved. Lucilita Bhreatnach said that Sinn Fein also wanted to see the unionists in talks. McGuinness said that it was heartening that they were consulting throughout the community. Adams said that Sinn Fein were talking to people who were talking to the Unionists and that the signals were positive. All the logic was that they should participate in the talks. He endorsed oCaoláin's remarks on prisoners. This was a cross community issue which affected everybody.

37. Dr Mowlam looked ahead to the events in Derry at the weekend. The prospects were beginning to look better. Would it be useful to say, in terms of the unionists, that Sinn Fein had put its efforts into making Derry peaceful? That might help to show the unionists that Sinn Fein were serious about peace. McGuinness said that the people already knew what efforts Sinn Fein were making but they could consider a statement. But there was irritation that the loyalists did not respect nationalists. He expected the weekend to pass off peacefully but people like him would have to walk the streets to ensure that it did. The Bogside Residents Group had raised the issue of flying the Union Jack on the City walls over the Bogside. What was the point? Only the nationalists would see it. Could the Secretary of State use her influence on this issue? It was not even the flag at the time of the siege! The Secretary of State undertook to look into this.

38. Gerry Adams picked up the theme of symbols and emblems. It was provocative, for example, when the Union flag was flown on public buildings in West Belfast. This was all the symbolism of "the Gibraltar type mentality". The Irish language and culture needed to be given its proper place. (Caoimhghín oCaoláin commended one of the security personnel who had greeted Sinn Fein at the gates that morning in Irish). Adams

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criticised the way that an Irish language group in the North had been subject to political vetting. The Secretary of State said that the Government was happy to explore what was being done on language issues in other countries.

39. Lucilita Bhreatnach returned to the level of security force patrolling. Sinn Fein were increasingly receiving reports, especially from rural areas, that the level of patrolling had actually increased in the last two weeks. There had been constant air patrols over West Belfast over the past two days. None of this seemed to tie in with the Secretary of State's own figures. Mr Leach explained some of the de-escalatory measures that had been taken. Gerry Adams asserted, however, that at 7.30 the previous evening the area from the Springfield Road to Andersonstown had been "saturated" with army and RUC. Mr Leach referred to the continuing threat from the CLC, INLA and LVF.

40. Martin McGuinness said that it was important that a meeting took place soon between the Prime Minister and Gerry Adams. Sinn Fein were entitled to speak to the British Prime Minister. Other parties had had countless opportunities to meet the Prime Minister; Sinn Fein were being disadvantaged. A meeting should take place as soon as possible, and well in advance of 15 September.

41. Mr Thomas explained that the Government's position had been set out in his letter of 9 July. Dr Mowlam referred to the steps referred to in the Aide Memoire. Once we were beyond that Sinn Fein could be treated the same as other parties. Adams rejected any notion of a 'decontamination' period or that Sinn Fein were less important than others.

42. Mr Thomas referred to Lucilita Bhreatnach's comments about keeping the unionists in the process. He assumed that this meant that Sinn Fein were ready to do things to help the unionists. He hoped this was the case. The UUP's decisions about its own involvement could be affected by the way that Sinn Fein presented its own position, including on decommissioning. Referring back to Gerry Adams' earlier remarks about the Prime Minister's speech in Belfast, Mr Thomas pointed out that what Mr Blair had said was in the nature of a prediction; he was not ruling out a united Ireland. Of course, Sinn Fein were free to argue their own position in talks.

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43. In reply, Gerry Adams asked what the Government's position would be in talks? It was not just the parties who had to take up positions. Dr Mowlam made it clear that all options would be on the table, plus consent, fairness and equality; the Frameworks were a guide to a balanced constitutional settlement.

44. Martin McGuinness emphasised that it would be a mistake to put limits on what could be achieved in the negotiations. There was a perception that the Prime Minister's speech had been the most pro-union speech in the past 25 years, worse than Major or Thatcher. It had mentioned changes to the Irish constitution but no other possibilities. Partition was wrong, had failed and created injustice. This had to be utterly changed. Mr Thomas queried Mr McGuinness' earlier remarks that the Framework documents had characterised partition as a failure. This was not his interpretation. McGuinness thought it was implicit.

45. Lucilita Bhreatnach returned to the issue of SSUs. How long would the review take? Could they expect a quick answer? Mr Leach explained that one factor that would have a significant bearing on the review was the threat of an assisted escape. If there were indications that an assisted escape would be regarded by the movement as a breach of the ceasefire that would be helpful. The events at Whitemoor during the previous ceasefire meant that the prison authorities would necessarily proceed with caution. Gerry Adams said that these issues were out of Sinn Fein's hands. As far as he was concerned the last ceasefire was a good cessation and so was the present one. It was unrealistic to think that you could ever stop prisoners trying to escape. But if the prisoners knew that they were going home to Portlaoise, "the Blocks" or Maghaberry then there would be a different situation. The way forward was to get the prisoners back into jails in the North and Republic. He could not go to the IRA and get an undertaking about escapes. The Prison Service's own code said that prisoners should be kept close to their families.

46. The Secretary of State drew the meeting to a close. Adams thanked the Secretary of State for the meeting and returned to his opening comments. Sinn Fein were committed to a peace settlement. They would at all times assert their own analysis. They wanted a new psychology, a new engagement. They wanted the current process to work in a way which changed the whole relationship, history and acoustics in these islands. Today's meeting had been a "useful engagement". He hoped that

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ne and the Secretary of State would get to know each other better. He hoped that the Unionists would be in the process on 15 September.

47. Dr Mowlam in turn thanked Sinn Fein for the meeting. She hoped that circumstances would allow for many more. She emphasised her continuing hope that the words and deeds of the Republican movement would allow the process to move forward so that Sinn Fein could join the talks in September. Confidence was a two way street; each side needed to help the other.

48. Gerry Adams closed by asking whether "If, God forbid, something goes wrong in Derry" could Martin McGuinness ring Paul Murphy or he himself speak to the Secretary of State? Could they have telephone numbers? The Secretary of State said that she would be away on holiday but no doubt contacts could be made if necessary.

Press

49. There was a brief discussion about the line each side would take with the press. Adams and McGuinness were worried about references in a draft Government statement to a "genuine" ceasefire. This raised issues of double standards. The IRA had to have a genuine ceasefire while the loyalists could do what they wanted. Dr Mowlam said that she would not judge different organisations by different standards. Hence, for example, she had avoided reference to punishment beatings. In conclusion, the two sides agreed that they would say that the meeting had been wide-ranging and business-like and that each side had raised all the issues it had wanted.

50. The meeting concluded after two and a quarter hours at 1.15pm.

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