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### MEETING WITH SINN FEIN, 11 DECEMBER

The Prime Minister had an hour today with Gerry Adams, Martin McGuinness, Lucilita Bhreatnach, Martin Ferris, Siobhan O'Hanlon, Michelle Gildernew and Richard McAuley. Dr Mowlam, Paul Murphy, Quentin Thomas, Jonathan Powell, Alastair Campbell and I were also present. After initial greetings, McGuinness asked whether this was the room where the damage had been done in 1921. The ghosts of Michael Collins and Lloyd George were no doubt in the room. Adams referred jokingly to pictures of previous Prime Ministers in the hall of No 10, all of whose policies in Ireland had failed.

The Prime Minister said that he was glad to be able to continue the discussions started in Belfast. He wanted to emphasise again how important it was to make progress. The choice was between violence and despair or peace and progress. It was essential to ensure it was the latter. We were ready to make changes to achieve it. The process entailed risks for everyone, but the risks were worth taking.

The Prime Minister continued that progress in the talks had been slow. He would have liked it to be faster himself. He hoped that, in the new year, there would be rapid agreement on the bare bones of a settlement. He would like to see maximum progress on the security side. He was aware too of the concerns about prisoners. But the talks were the only way forward. Astonishing progress had been made in 7 months. All sides had people they needed to persuade, and people on the ground needed to have clear hope of a change and of normality in their lives. Today's meeting no doubt had great symbolism, but it was more important to resolve the issues in the coming months. A settlement could then be put to a referendum, north and south, and the problems could be resolved in a lasting way. If the process did not move forward, it would slip back, and he feared it would be worse than before. So the status quo was not an option. He would be interested to hear how Sinn Fein saw the situation and the issues of most importance to them.



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These could then be discussed with the aim of providing a stable framework for the future.

Adams said he was grateful to the Prime Minister for the meeting and for taking the risk of having it. The prize of lasting peace justified such risks. Whatever happened, Sinn Fein would continue to pursue the quest of a genuine democratic settlement. As he had said at the last meeting, the Prime Minister was in a unique position to achieve this, not least with his parliamentary majority. All past British policy in Ireland had failed. Sinn Fein wanted this phase to be the end game, and to establish a totally new relationship between Britain and Ireland. He wanted to know the position of the British government. He assumed they would not just stick on the Unionist veto. Had the previous Labour position of unity by consent all gone? Did the Government have a strategic view? He was prepared to go out and argue for whatever could be agreed, and try to make progress. But he needed to know the British long-term view. The Prime Minister did not have powers of prophecy, although he had said he would not see a united Ireland in the lifetime of the youngest person in the room. Nationalist Ireland had to be given hope. Was the Prime Minister's statement a prediction or a policy?

Adams continued that there was now a totally unprecedented opportunity to move forward. He agreed with the Prime Minister that recent progress had been astonishing: most parties were now sitting round one table, and most of them were properly engaged with one another; the two governments were working intensively together; there was huge international support for the process. But an arrangement hastily cobbled together would not stand the test of time. We had to look beyond May. He did not want to go into detail, which he could do on other occasions, for example about the need for total demilitarisation and the need for the Government to think through how all republican prisoners needed to be out by May. This was a historic moment and he wanted to start a completely new relationship based on friendship. He believed that the Prime Minister was well disposed. Republicans were too. His big fear was that the Prime Minister would take his eye off the ball with his other modernisation preoccupations.

The Prime Minister commented that he was aware of a need to focus constantly. Part of his modernisation programme was a settlement in Northern Ireland. Adams had referred to what he had said about a united Ireland. That was his view. He would not be a persuader for a united Ireland. What was important was the consent principle as a framework where people could make their own decisions about the future. There was now a different relationship with the Irish republic, where issues other than Northern Ireland were discussed. In these circumstances, it was not realistic to think that the majority of people in Northern Ireland were going to vote for a united Ireland. What was needed was a



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framework with which the nationalist community was comfortable, and which was consistent with the geographical situation and national links. It was not a straight choice between forcing people into a united Ireland and sticking with the status quo.

Adams commented that republicans were effectively forced to accept the status quo against their will. The Prime Minister said that was why the status quo was not an option. He wanted to create a position that was fair and seen to be so. Adams said that he could accept what the Prime Minister said, but he wanted the Prime Minister to make a leap of imagination. If he could not be a persuader for a united Ireland, he assumed he was still ready to be the guarantor or facilitator. Britain was signed up to this. The Prime Minister had said that he could not envisage a vote for a united Ireland. But these things could change. In present circumstances, if 51% of the population opted for a united Ireland, the Government was bound to legislate for this. This would be a calamity, since 49% of the population simply would not accept it. The Government had to think beyond the present situation.

The Prime Minister said that he wanted to make sense of the historical situation in Northern Ireland and define a settlement which fitted both traditions and the relationship between north and south. This could then be put to people, North and South. He could not pre-judge what the settlement would be. That was for the parties to decide, although he could tell Adams what he expected to see. His leap of imagination was to move both communities away from where they were currently camped towards a settlement agreed by both.

Adams said that he understood this, but was trying to get the Prime Minister to look beyond it. Northern Ireland was the most challenging test of the Prime Minister's term of office. The nationalists were displaced citizens in their own country. They simply wanted to live in an honourable way without upsetting others. Partition had created a territorial nonsense. The majority in Northern Ireland still wanted the Union, but there was a nationalist majority in 4 out of the 6 counties. Were we going to allow Ian Paisley to set the pace, with his inflammatory language? He had called Adams' constituency a nest of vipers. It was no wonder people went out to kill Catholics - he noted in passing that the gun used for the latest killing had been part of a shipment from Brian Wilson, whom he had mentioned to the Prime Minister last time. He appreciated Trimble's position, but his only difference with Paisley was probably tactical. Both were trying to prevent the kind of settlement he and the Prime Minister wanted. Trimble would have to engage with Sinn Féin in the end. He should not be allowed to stop the process.



The Prime Minister said he had some questions of his own for Adams. He hoped he could answer them in what was a private meeting. First, could he go back to his people and say that the outcome was not a united Ireland? Second, there were all kinds of stories about the ceasefire and its possible breakdown. Could the ceasefire hold, even when Adams had to tell people that he could not deliver a united Ireland today, or even tomorrow?

Adams said that it was no coincidence that today's Daily Telegraph had an article about a breakdown of the ceasefire. There were similar articles or TV programmes every time there was an important meeting. But he would try to answer the Prime Minister's question. It would obviously be a big problem to go back to his people and say that there was no possibility of a united Ireland and no possibility of an end to British rule, although if he reached that conclusion, that is what he would have to do. The question was rather how he could bring people along. He had to show them an alternative way forward. There was no point in arguing about the morality of armed struggle or of the British occupation. He wanted to persuade people there was another way. If progress was being made and the situation was being changed, this made the task much easier. He should be encouraged in this by all those who said they wanted to stop the armed struggle. There was for example a big agenda of equality and justice. He needed to be able to say that there was now a genuinely democratic, level playing field. He could then say that, if there was not a united Ireland, at least the situation had moved on so much that everyone could join together in pursuit of this goal. He was being honest, because this was the most important meeting they would have. Partition made no sense in Ireland, particularly now that the South's economic prospects had been transformed. Historically, geographically, politically and socially, partition was simply not right. There were two obstacles to a change: British policy and the unionist veto. Could this Government be the one which ended British rule, rather than just containing the situation? A genuinely democratic solution, or democratic alternative, had to be created, rather than some pre-determined outcome. He wanted the Prime Minister to think outside the restrictions of British policy and the unionist veto.

The Prime Minister said he understood what Adams was saying. If a settlement was to last, both communities had to be comfortable with it. This was difficult if there was a sense on either side that the outcome was completely pre-determined. But what would end progress completely was any return to violence. If this happened, he could never come back to the present situation again. He wanted to move forward, but there was an historic obligation on Sinn Fein to pursue only the route of political negotiation.



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Adams asked whether the Prime Minister could imagine what it was like with the British Army all over his constituency. Recent changes in patrolling were equivalent to the IRA declaring a day-time ceasefire in West Belfast. He knew the SDLP had raised these issues with the Prime Minister. But there was an ingrained militarism in the British approach. Meanwhile the Emergency Provisions Act was being renewed. Dr Mowlam commented that the Government was bound to have provisions to fight terrorism. Internment had been taken off the face of the Bill because it was unacceptable in a democracy. The legislation would be better than before. She was also working to improve the Diplock courts and had fought to get legislative time to start the Police Bill. This was not a bad record.

McGuinness said that renewal of the legislation would nevertheless send a poor message. He had always believed himself that the strength of the "securocrats" in the British Government worked against the peace process. The British approach had always been militaristic. He hoped the Prime Minister would change this. He had grown up amongst unpunished security force killings of nationalists. Internment had created the IRA, and Bloody Sunday had turned the nationalist community definitively against the Army. The Prime Minister said that he could quote counter examples such as Enniskillen. There were tragedies on all sides.

McGuinness acknowledged this. But all the violence stemmed from the failure of the British Government to show that it would not tolerate civil rights abuses. The area where he lived in Bogside was 95 per cent nationalist, but patrolled by 4-500 RUC officers, all of whom were unionists and many of whom were in the Orange Order. There was no empathy. His local fire station flew the Union Jack, whereas he had been arrested for putting up a tricolour during the election. He wanted the Prime Minister to be the one who ended all this.

The Prime Minister said that he wanted to reduce the security profile. If people had more confidence that there would not be a return to violence, he would be able to do more.

Lucilita Bhreatnach said that the Prime Minister had the opportunity to change things. A huge amount could be done outside the talks, for example in ending cultural discrimination, helping prisoners and their families and other specific issues. She wanted to know what the British Government's Christmas present was going to be.

The Prime Minister said that progress had been made on many fronts. But not everything could be achieved overnight. He had made huge efforts to get the UUP into the process, because if they were not there, it would not work. It was



tremendously important that everyone adhered to the democratic path in moving forward. That would make it easier to do more. He needed to know that Sinn Fein were locked into the political process and would stick to their commitment to the Mitchell principles. He needed to look into Adams' eyes and hear him say this.

Adams confirmed that they were locked into the political process, and understood the commitment to the Mitchell principles. McGuinness said that the Prime Minister should not allow himself to be influenced by securocrats. He had stood up to them over decommissioning, and should continue to do so. There were people in the Government machine who had the same agenda as Trimble. Measures could be taken outside the talks which would help the talks. People had to see the benefits, rather than huge watch-towers in South Armagh. The Prime Minister repeated that he wanted to make as much progress in this area as he possible could. It was in our interest. Dr Mowlam added that, with the CAC, INLA and LVF all threatening violence, the Government was bound to take security very seriously.

Ferris said that, despite the Prime Minister's commitment, there was no transparency in the process. What nationalists saw was the Prime Minister's statement about no united Ireland in his lifetime; Trimble saying that he had a veto through the consent principle; inequality of economic opportunity between the two communities; prisoner problems; the plight of Roisin McAliskey; lack of equality; sectarianism; and discrimination against nationalist elected representatives. All this undermined confidence.

Dr Mowlam said that she accepted there were great problems in local government, but if she made changes, she was likely to be accused by the nationalists of moving towards a partitionist settlement. If she made changes, Sinn Fein might not like all the consequences.

McGuinness said that today's meeting was the most important for 75 years, but there was another hugely important meeting to come, that between Gerry Adams and David Trimble. Trimble should be encouraged to do it, and the Prime Minister was the man who could do this. He gave Trimble credit for being in the talks, even though he suspected his motivation. The UUP's refusal to talk directly to Sinn Fein was creating problems. It was, for example, holding up progress on the key issues paper. The absence of direct talk would have a very detrimental effect if it went on. He agreed with the Prime Minister that the talk would have to hit the ground running in January. Under the Rules of Procedure which Trimble, not Sinn Fein, had helped devise, any party could raise anything. But Trimble would not address demilitarisation, when it was raised by Sinn Fein, while he expected others to talk about an Assembly, raised by him. Adams had raised a



crucially important point, that the nationalists were in the majority in four of the six counties. Only East Belfast and North Down were now really unionist. Trimble should be encouraged to talk to Sinn Fein. This would be a dramatic step forward, and would also help Trimble, as well as undermining Paisley.

Dr Mowlam raised the escaped IRA prisoner. Adams said "Good luck to him, he is Irish". Dr Mowlam said that was an awful comment for us to hear.

Adams concluded that he did not want Sinn Fein to seem to be haranguing or lecturing the Prime Minister. People had just been enumerating the difficulties. He wanted to return to what he had said at the beginning about the two big issues of British policy and the unionist veto. He hoped the Prime Minister would reflect on these over Christmas. He accepted that the Prime Minister was taking risks, and wished him well, as he had said before. He had tried to avoid repetition of stock positions and to get behind these. He hoped the Prime Minister would have a good Christmas.

McGuinness had the final word. Bloody Sunday remained very important for the families of the victims. The Prime Minister said that we were aware of this and were looking at it.

There was a brief discussion of the line to take with the press, with Sinn Fein joking that they would simply say the Prime Minister had promised British withdrawal, all prisoners out and release for Roisin McAliskey. More seriously, McGuinness said that there had been a lot of stuff in the press beforehand about the Prime Minister lecturing Sinn Fein about being thrown out of the talks. This was not helpful. Adams added that the Prime Minister talking up what had been said about violence, as had happened in Belfast, only encouraged an unhelpful nationalist response, although he had managed to avoid this last time in Belfast. The Prime Minister said that he would nevertheless have to make clear his view about the importance of not returning to violence.

As the meeting broke, the Prime Minister had a private word with Adams. He spelt out that if the IRA did go back to violence, he would never be able to do business with Adams again. Adams said that he could split the IRA tomorrow, but he wanted to keep them together because he thought that was a better way to make progress. He was out there every day arguing for this.

### Comment

This was a constructive exchange. There was a notable difference between Adams, who focussed on the big issues, and used a light humorous touch



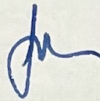
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throughout, and his colleagues, who ensured that the usual list of republican demands was gone through. This may have been deliberate. The Prime Minister was pleased with the meeting, not least with the apparently clear acceptance by Adams that he would have to live with a solution well short of his objective of a united Ireland, and with the assurances that Sinn Fein were locked into political means and the Mitchell principles. He commented afterwards that he would find it helpful at some stage to have a longer, more informal exchange with just Adams and McGuinness.

I am copying this to John Grant (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), Jan Polley (Cabinet Office), Christopher Meyer (Washington) and Veronica Sutherland (Dublin).

*Yours*



**JOHN HOLMES**

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