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Meeting with Sinn Féin

28th November 1996

Present were:

Sinn Féin side: Mr. Gerry Adams, Ms. Rita O'Hare. (Mr. McGuinness, who intended to be present, was unable to do so when the meeting was postponed for an hour at our request).

Official side: Mr. Paddy Teahon, Mr. Tim Dalton, Mr. Sean Ó hUiginn

1. Mr. Adams began by asking "where now"? Mr. Teahon gave an account of recent events. The Irish Government had no inkling that the statement was to be published until just after midday. The Taoiseach had taken great exception to the British action, and had made this plain in the strongest terms. He had asked for a delay in publication of 48 hours, which was refused. There had been very tough talking. When it became clear that Major was adamant on publication, the Taoiseach had asked that the accompanying statement should make clear that an unequivocal ceasefire and commitment to the Mitchell principles would have Sinn Féin in talks after the Christmas break. Major said he would see if he could reflect that in the accompanying statement. The Taoiseach had sent a letter in very forthright terms to the Prime Minister. The Irish Government had issued a statement which had been copied to Sinn Féin.
2. Mr. Adams summarised developments at his end. He had had a very constructive meeting with John Hume the previous evening. Hume was

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proposing to go back to London today to talk things over with Major. Major had a choice of positioning himself on a sliding scale: he could either sign up, or at a minimum not do damage, or do what he did. He knew that the Irish Government, the US and John Hume were working to bring the initiative to fruition. Instead he had leaked things through the unionists and caught Hume in a classic bind. Mr. Adams said "today's statement preempts and squashes what you and we were at". The present initiative had been entirely at Sinn Féin initiative. It had now been rejected and was over. The fact that Major would not hold back a publication which was so unnecessary in the first place showed he could not move without the unionist vote, and how little hope there was that the British wanted to move forward. He had chosen Trimble over Hume's initiative.

3. Mr. Teahon pointed to the hope of the Irish Government, the SDLP and the Americans still managing to move things forward. There was no ambiguity about the Irish position. The US was now able to form a clear judgement of the British position. He appealed strongly for Sinn Féin to see the value of a political engagement in those circumstances. Why not rely on political pressure from these sources, rather than a British change of heart?
4. Mr. Adams said the difficulty was persuading the IRA. He and his colleagues had been working from a "broadly educational point of view" to persuade people of the value of such a political engagement, and to encourage them to take the necessary steps. This would be one more development to reinforce the physical force analysis, and make it more difficult to channel those attitudes politically.
5. Mr. Teahon and Mr. O hUiginn stressed that a fresh outbreak of violence would simply put the coping stone on the analysis and efforts of those who

were working for the political isolation of the Republican movement. They would be fulfilling their enemies' prophecies and perhaps hopes, with any further violence.

6. Mr. Adams asked what the Government reading now was of British intentions. Mr. Teahon recalled earlier discussions with the British. The absence of any extra comfort on a "P. O'Neill" statement had been invoked in the preparation of the present text. He pointed to the reference to the Christmas recess in the accompanying British statement. There was essentially the same complex of forces as before. If Sinn Féin could persuade the IRA to make the necessary ceasefire statements, both Governments had commitments in that respect, and the Irish Government would then have the wherewithal to press to have them respected.
7. Mr. Dalton deplored the British decision to publish the text in those circumstances. They had done so presumably to please Trimble. He suggested it was still worth looking at the substance behind the hostile language. Was this giving cover to Trimble to sit at the table with Sinn Féin after the Christmas recess? Mr. Adams said the reference in Major's statement was one stand-alone sentence. He had heard Mr. Trimble earlier that day give a categorical "no" to a question whether he would enter into talks with Sinn Féin. His statement today was intended to give time to try to put some initiative together again. He did not believe the IRA could go forward on the basis of an Irish consensus. He thought personally that might be the best approach, but it would "get knocked back" and weaken his position if he tried to secure it. It would be asking him to repeat August '94 but with clear signals that things were worse this time round in relation for example, to decommissioning.

8. Mr. Adams said he would be in Athens for a few days at a book launch. He would like to explore what it meant to "fill the gaps" referred to by the Tánaiste. This was a difficult dilemma for the Sinn Féin leadership. They wanted to proceed in the electoral and negotiating mode and this frustrated them. The present initiative had come entirely from Sinn Féin and had been very close to success. They had wanted only a reasonable "comfort blanket" for the IRA to "lubricate" the political process. Sinn Féin still wanted to see "what could be scraped out of the situation". There was an understandable temptation for the Irish Government to talk up the possibility of bridging gaps which threw the onus back on Sinn Féin. The Government should not do that unless there was a reasonable prospect of actually succeeding.

9. After some further discussion, Mr. Adams said there were three ways forward:

- There could be a "historic decision" by the IRA to suspend violence indefinitely and to rely on an Irish political dynamic.

- There could be an attempt to hold the present situation and ensure as little slippage as possible.

- There could be an attempt to negotiate a formula out of the present situation which Sinn Féin could put to the IRA.

10. Mr. O hUiginn said that the Government instinct would be to try the third option. There was something of a pendulum factor in British Government policy. We would want to explore whether we could secure a reasonable understanding that an unequivocal ceasefire and commitment to the Mitchell principles would have Sinn Féin at the table after a Christmas recess of the

talks. The first option had many attractions, but the solidity of that "Irish dynamic" would be directly proportionate to the confidence that violence had ceased for good. If it was attempted and collapsed due to an outbreak of violence, the political damage would be very great. There was no getting around the fact that violence was an unsurmountably divisive and inhibiting factor in terms of any political plan of action of that kind. All roads to real progress lay through a credible and lasting ceasefire. The IRA should be shown that the violence served their enemies cause rather than their own, and draw the necessary conclusions.

11. Mr. Adams said that those who held back may now feel compelled to "have a go". He accepted the Government point that this would be exploited by many politicians for "self-serving justification". He could not offer any comfort except his own view. He believed there would ultimately be a settlement. All Irish Governments and all the Southern parties were committed to that. The present British Government was not however committed. As to the future, "I can't give up and I can't predict". Everyone, even the unionists, saw that negotiations would be needed. He urged the Irish Government to "see what's salvageable" and suggested contact on Sunday.
12. In the course of further general reflections on the position, Mr. Adams said he had given Hume "carte blanche" to explore in a discreet and private way what was needed to secure a ceasefire before Christmas. They were hopeful the correspondence would not be released (although Adams said he had his doubts when he saw it was not marked even "confidential").
13. Mr. Dalton asked about the possibilities of direct British meetings with Sinn Féin at present. Mr. Adams said they would accept that if offered. They

would be saying robust things about the present British position in public. It would be counter-productive to be seen to be crawling in response to it.

14. Mr. Dalton asked about the situation if the British signalled that Sinn Féin would definitely be in the talks at their resumption, subject to the conditions outlined.
15. Mr. Adams said he would be "waffling" if he moved off the Sinn Féin position of October 10th. The British were opposed to the clarity of it. It had included three or four simple propositions (e.g. there should be talks, decommissioning should be taken forward without blocking the negotiations, etc.). They had repeatedly refused even a mention of the Irish language. A negotiated settlement ultimately implied an acknowledgement that you could not defeat the opponent. Neither the British nor the unionists were at that point. Something was needed "outside the box" to change that situation.
16. Mr. Teahon again drew attention to the counter-productive and catastrophic implications of a new campaign of violence where everybody, including the loyalists, got sucked in. Mr. Adams quoted James Connolly to the effect that the Irish were poor revolutionaries, but great rebels. There would always be an IRA until there was a settlement. Their leadership at the moment was OK, but there would always be pressures on them or someone else to reassert the physical force tradition. He instanced the CAC bomb in Derry ("I knew it was not an IRA bomb because it didn't go off"). There was little point in him or his companions parting company with the Republican movement, if that meant ultimately the physical force tradition held uncontested sway.
17. There followed a discussion on the political dimension of the Republican movement. Mr. Dalton and Mr. O hUiginn suggested that the unionists, and

some of the British, clearly feared the political role of Sinn Féin much more than the physical force tradition of Republicanism. Republicans should learn the lesson.

18. At the conclusion of the meeting Mr. Adams reasserted the need to find a pathway to peace. It looked very bleak, but the Irish Government should not give up, even if the best efforts on the nationalist side had been set aside. If something positive could be salvaged from the British side, he asked that he should get as much notice as possible and in as private a manner as possible.

Sean Ó hUiginn

29 November 1996.