

4-DEC-1996 12:11 FROM CAB SEC

TO

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Tánaiste,

Herewith a note of the last meeting with Sinn Féin, and also a short paper sketching out how that scenario might work in practice.

I propose to telephone to check your views on it after the Christmas break.

In the meantime enjoy the break

Sean Olt

Sean Ó hUiginn

23 December 1996

cc: Mr. Teahon ✓
Mr. Dalton

-1996 12:12 FROM CAB SEC

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SECRET**Meeting with Sinn Féin****20 December, 1996**

Present were:

Official Side: Mr. P. Teahon, Mr. T. Dalton, Mr. S. O hUiginn**Sinn Féin Side:** Mr. Gerry Adams, Mr. Martin McGuinness, Ms. Rita O'Hare.

1. The meeting lasted about two and a half hours. Mr. Teahon began by outlining events at the Summit with Mr. Major, and during the Taoiseach and Tánaiste's visit to Washington. The Summit discussions had centred around the issue of a fixed date for Sinn Féin's entry into talks, subject to certain conditions. Mr. Major had been sceptical, from his experience of the collapse of the ceasefire. He did not rule out such a date, but felt that, if fixed in advance, it would become a political football. The very strong arguments advanced by the Taoiseach and Tánaiste had been to no avail. It had overall been a very difficult meeting.
2. Mr. Teahon said that the Washington visit, in contrast, had been particularly good. President Clinton was still very much engaged. He shared broadly our view on the question of admission of Sinn Féin. He had gone as close as it was diplomatically possible to saying the British were wrong on the issue.

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3. Mr. O hUiginn summarised developments in the talks to date. The next plenary would be on the 27th January. Bilateral contacts would resume as from the 13th January, but without any great expectation of a breakthrough.
4. Mr. Adams took issue formally with the tenor of some of the Taoiseach's remarks in Washington, on grounds that they put the onus on the Republican movement in a one-sided way. Mr. Teahon rejected this analysis, pointing out that Sinn Féin would be aware of only one half of the Taoiseach's presentation, and not the very strong balancing statements which he had made, mostly in private, to his interlocutors.
5. The official side emphasised strongly that this was a critical juncture in the peace process. The room for manoeuvre was limited and the situation was very fragile. Any escalation of violence would do irreparable damage to our hopes. It was stressed to Sinn Féin that any political scenarios being considered in terms of their inclusion all presupposed that the Republican movement would refrain from escalating violence, if only because any actions which seemed to confirm the "O'Callaghan scenario" would have an inordinate effect on public opinion. The Sinn Féin side did not demur from this analysis and, while making formal disclaimers in relation to IRA attacks, seemed to accept that both sides were working on that same assumption.
6. Mr. Adams said that Mr. Major's *Belfast Telegraph* interview was very worrying, and showed a hardline and unyielding view. If Mr. Major had doubts about the Republican bona fides, the British and Sinn Féin should

10. get together in a room. They should thrash out what each needed to say. Many Republicans were now resentful that their leadership was reduced to begging for dialogue.
7. He had had a meeting with John Hume and some Methodist ministers in the Conway Mill very recently. One had asked him why they were not meeting the British, assuming that the obstacle was on the Sinn Féin side.
8. Mr. Adams said that one idea which had emerged in discussions with Hume was the notion of an approach to Mr. Blair and Mr. Ashdown to brief them on the current situation, and to request them to approach Major and offer support for certain changes in the November 28th statement. In a contact with Hume earlier in the week, Blair had indicated that it would be difficult to get Major to change his mind on aspects he had rejected, but he had not totally ruled out the possibility of going to him.
9. Hume had asked whether it was possible for Sinn Féin to define the necessary changes. They had told him it would not be possible to sort it out until after the New Year. It was possible the IRA would say "no" to any such approach, but he (Adams) felt personally that there would be "wriggle room" on three or four elements. Some of these could be semantic, but it would not be possible to change the substance, on which there could be no ambiguity. The Republican movement had limited room to move, largely due to the tactics of the UK Government.

10. Mr. Dalton expressed unease at the idea of the situation being left in abeyance for a long time, with all the consequent dangers of deterioration. He urged strongly an approach where the Republican movement should find a way of declaring a ceasefire anyway, for their own independent reasons, and by relation to Irish needs and conditions.
11. Mr. McGuinness said that if the British had achieved anything, it was to sow throughout the Republican movement the conviction that the main British goal was to split it. Any consideration of that kind of scenario would lead to a split.
12. Mr. Dalton argued the political strength that would come from such a situation, which would join Irish nationalists together in support of a process of negotiation. It was inconceivable that the British could simply sit out the situation for ever, if there was a credible cessation.
13. Mr. Adams said they had done precisely that for eighteen months. Mr. McGuinness reinforced the theme: Sinn Féin delegations had been up and down to Stormont "like a fiddler's elbow". They had persevered for months, to no avail. One of the few current signs of hope was that Blair was now taking an interest, even if belatedly.
14. Mr. Teahon argued strongly for basing a strategy on an Irish position, and illustrated at some length the tactical and strategic advantages which that would have.

15. Mr. Adams drew a distinction between the Sinn Féin and the IRA view. There were opportunistic arguments for an IRA ceasefire which would expose the intransigence of the unionists and the British. The IRA would not however do the opportunistic thing. Sinn Féin could see the political advantages, but he recalled Mr. McGuinness' point on the need to bring the Republican movement as a whole with the leadership. They had achieved that in August 1994. Mr. McGuinness said that some of the arguments being put forward at this meeting were ironically reminiscent of arguments prior to 1994. There were real difficulties in this approach. They could live with the unionist difficulties, but the British role was crucial.
16. Mr. Adams dwelt on other British actions likely to heighten tensions within the Republican movement: there were moves afoot to release the two British soldiers responsible for the McBride killing in 1992. Ms. McAliskey had been refused bail. "Dingus" McGee had not seen his family for more than two years. There were deliberately destructive searches in Ballymurphy, leading even to a bin lid protest. The physical force analysis in the Republican movement was being progressively reinforced. The previous ceasefire had been leadership led. It could only be reopened now on the basis of the leadership having covered their backs. If the space opened again, they could use those leadership skills. The key to a ceasefire was the potential for credible talks. The IRA fully understood that when they stopped again, it would probably be forever. (He mused that the organisation itself would probably shrink to skeletal form which might be required purely for defensive purposes east of the Bann.)

17. Mr. O hUiginn stressed the need to take account of the current political context: the present British administration was manifestly in its death throes. Major was negotiating his survival on a week-to-week basis. A general election campaign would begin within the next six to twelve weeks. There had been strong hints from the British administration that the inclusion of Sinn Féin in dialogue before a British general election was not excluded. We had simply been careful to acknowledge that we did not have a "bankable" political promise from Mr. Major in that respect.
18. Mr. O hUiginn said this was a very critical juncture, in the peace process if it did not go forward would very probably go back. Without a ceasefire, very little outreach was possible. With a ceasefire, formidable pressures for inclusion of Sinn Féin could be built up. Even if the British did not respond, the groundwork could be laid for the post election period. In short, a series of viable fall-backs could be worked out for the Republican movement in the event they declared a ceasefire based on independent, Irish reasons.
19. Mr. Adams recalled the difficulties created during the last IRA cessation. Every warning statement he had made about these had been wrongly interpreted as a threat. He instanced the various ways the RUC had taken advantage of the cessation to raise its profile in places like Crossmaglen. He instanced also difficulties with Dublin, and the fact that the SDLP was not a cohesive party. What had been the catalyst which produced an Eddie O'Brien or a Dermot O'Neill? There were now higher expectations in the nationalist community. They were

assertive about their rights to equality as never before. Why was there no armed struggle in Finglas, where deprivation, etc., was comparable? People on the ground would know if the Republican leadership were being led up the street, and they would thereby get cut off from their base. If the ceasefire was put together again, it could not be taken for granted.

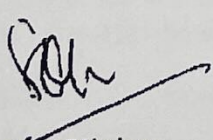
20. Mr. McGuinness said the British Government had been hostile to the process from the beginning. Peter Brooke on *Panorama* was the only instance of a British good word for Gerry Adams. There had also been a change of direction when the present Taoiseach took over. Mr. Adams added that the failure to meet himself and Hume on the day of the Nobel Peace Prize had gone very deep. If it had been in Sinn Féin's power, the IRA would not have broken the ceasefire. That did not alter the fact there was a need for another ceasefire. The key was presenting the IRA with a pathway into credible talks. If some formula was feasible, a greater understanding of the nationalist community had to be factored in this time.
21. The Official side demurred at the notion of a change of direction under the Taoiseach. Mr. Teahon pointed out that a constructive tension was often necessary to get people to take the necessary decisions.
22. Mr. O hUiginn said the issue now was whether there was a way back to a ceasefire, which was the essential precondition for everything. Drawing the strands together we noted their interest in Hume's idea of developing the relationship with Mr. Blair. We sensed from the meeting a realistic

acceptance of the limits of what could be done in the shadow of a general election. It was necessary to be very realistic on the degree to which Mr. Blair would be risk averse at present. It was necessary also to be realistic about Mr. Major's capacity to go back on a text that he had probably signed off on with Trimble, Cranbourne and others. Perhaps one could develop the thought, but in a different way. Rather than looking to significant changes of doctrine or text, or substantive negotiations in the interval, should not Sinn Féin be prudently working to lay the basis for a reinvigorated effort after the election?

23. Combining such an approach with the idea of a more Irish based initiative for the ceasefire, Mr. O hUiginn suggested the possibility of an Irish Government statement which set out the common ground so far, and the views of the Irish Government. This might envisage a fixed rendezvous for inclusive talks after the election, and some confidence-building measures in between. It could be shown to the British Government, and, crucially, to Mr. Blair before publication. If we had prior comfort that the IRA would declare a ceasefire subject to agreement by the key protagonists on that approach, it might be possible to secure in advance endorsements by Mr. Blair, the U.S., etc. It would be hoped that Mr. Major would also sign on, which would further reassure Mr. Blair. Sinn Féin could persuade the IRA that such a widespread understanding, particularly endorsed by Mr. Blair as almost certainly the next Prime Minister, warranted a ceasefire now. That would also open the way for a much more pro-active diplomacy by the Irish Government, the US, etc., on conditions for inclusive Talks than could ever be possible under the shadow of the existing threat. It was stressed that this

was an attempt to synthesise creatively the points made in the discussion, and had not been put to, much less cleared, politically, with Irish Ministers.

24. The Sinn Féin side seemed receptive and expressed a positive interest in such a scenario. They asked whether it could be summarised on paper so that it could be considered in more detail after the holiday period.
25. Mr. Adams, summing up for the Sinn Féin side, said that the meeting had been an extremely useful one. He looked forward to developing the discussion which had been begun at this meeting immediately after the Christmas break.
26. Mr. Dalton endorsed the Sinn Féin view that the meeting had been a constructive one. The approach proposed would also give Mr. Major the possibility to make inclusive moves before the election, as the British system were hinting they were disposed to do in certain circumstances. Mr. Blair would be "windy", and it would be necessary to put to him a strongly reassuring scenario in terms of a ceasefire.
27. At the end of the meeting the Irish side stressed again the need to prevent any deterioration in the situation in the interval.


Sean Ó hUiginn

23 December 1996