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General, Minister of State
Coveney, Messrs. Teahon,
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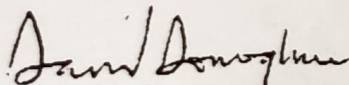
Confidential

Multi-Party Talks

Daily Report - 19 November 1996

1. Today was a fairly uneventful day involving further bilaterals among delegations.
2. The SDLP met the UUP (Empey, Weir and King) this afternoon. The UUP initially sought a discussion of the terms of Sinn Féin entry to the talks, underlining their difficulties with a "ceasefire only" approach and suggesting that there might be value in exploring what would constitute evidence of commitment to the democratic process. The SDLP were unwilling to assist the Unionists in devising yet another test to be met by Sinn Féin and the UUP did not pursue the matter.
3. It was clear from their subsequent decommissioning discussion that the UUP are still intent on marginalising the envisaged sub-committee and securing a central role for the Independent Commission. (The SDLP, like ourselves, see this as evidence of a continuing UUP refusal to acknowledge the political requirements which they must meet if decommissioning is to take place). The two parties are to meet again tomorrow morning and a trilateral involving Alliance is envisaged for tomorrow afternoon.
4. The two Governments were represented today at official level. Both delegations had an informal bilateral at which we discussed the British proposal of last week, the terms of entry for Sinn Féin and the likely Unionist response if Sinn Féin entered the talks immediately after a ceasefire.
5. The British, who had seen Alliance today, reported a pessimistic presentation by Alderdice which paralleled that given to the Taoiseach in Dublin yesterday. The British had also seen the UUP (Empey and colleagues) and had detected an openness to the kind of role which the British were proposing for the Commission. The UUP's main concern, however, was with the terms of Sinn Féin's entry. The British emphasised to them that two of the points in their recent paper had no hope of being sold to others, viz., prior decommissioning of some weapons as a precondition for Sinn Féin being admitted to three-stranded talks and advance agreement to a schedule of decommissioning instalments.
6. In a general review of the options which exist at present, we pointed out that there is a fairly stark choice to be made between going for a ceasefire and a talks process of some kind or ending up potentially with neither. We highlighted the significance of Sinn Féin's readiness to agree to the implementation of all aspects of the Mitchell Report. The British proposal, on the other hand, would be perceived by them as going clearly beyond the Mitchell requirements and could not be sold to them.

7. In discussion, the British suggested that the Commission need not necessarily be seen as a military/technical agency but could be given a wider political remit not unlike that of the original International Body. They also suggested that the "judgement" which the Commission would be asked to reach would be informed by the views of the participants, mediated through a liaison committee, and that in any event the only judgement which would ultimately count would be that reached by the participants collectively. While acknowledging that UUP support for it was far from certain, they described their proposal as their "best shot" for overcoming the present impasse.
8. We emphasised that the British approach would enable the UUP to remain in denial on the political context necessary for decommissioning and would also vest a political judgement of fundamental importance in an external agency which would still be perceived as having a purely technical remit. In effect, the Commission would be given an "eject button" to determine, through its judgement, whether or not Sinn Féin and the Loyalist parties remained at the talks. If the judgement did not meet Unionist approval, furthermore, the Unionist parties could be expected to walk out in protest. We also pointed to the improbability of getting individuals of the requisite calibre to agree to take on such a role.
9. The British showed some interest in a suggestion made on our side that the current three Chairmen might be given a proactive role in encouraging agreement among the participants on the timing of decommissioning.
10. On the current textual discussions and the terms for Sinn Féin's entry, we pointed out that relatively limited risks had to be taken by the British Government in order to secure a ceasefire. Without this and an inclusive process, no stable settlement could be achieved. We emphasised that, following a ceasefire declaration, Sinn Féin should be admitted to the talks on terms which involved equality of treatment with the other participants and the continuation of a political process of some kind during the period prior to their entry to substantive negotiations. The British expressed concern that immediate entry would prompt an immediate walk-out by the Unionist parties (probably all three) and that these parties could stay away for an extended period.
11. Bilaterals are to continue tomorrow. A meeting between the two Governments and the Chairmen has been scheduled for 12 noon. PM Holkeri decided against convening the Plenary for tomorrow, given the continuing absence of progress in the bilaterals.



David Donoghue
19 November 1996