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Secretary

Meeting between Taoiseach and Lord Alderdice
Government Buildings, 18 November 1996
Summary Report

1. The Taoiseach was accompanied by the Minister for Justice and the Attorney General, with Paddy Teahon, Val O'Donnell and Rory Montgomery also present. Lord Alderdice was unaccompanied. The meeting lasted for a little over ninety minutes.

Decommissioning

2. Lord Alderdice explained the thinking behind the Alliance Party's proposal that the decommissioning issue be taken forward by an International Commission accountable not to the Talks but to the two Governments. He suggested that there was much preparatory work - for example, assessing intelligence reports, and recommending on possible regulations - to be undertaken before physical decommissioning actually started. The existence of such a Commission - even if not all of its members had been appointed - could be used by the UUP to demonstrate that progress was being made on the issue, and this could afford them cover for entry into substantive political talks. He also suggested that a loose liaison arrangement, whether with a committee, the Plenary, or bilaterally, would allow for some political input, which might vary according to parties' individual inclinations.
3. Lord Alderdice said that the UUP had responded positively to the Alliance proposal; that the SDLP, while initially cautious, would be willing to entertain it if it led to genuine political engagement by the UUP; and that the loyalist parties had no problems with it. Alliance had no dealings with the DUP or the UKUP, both of which openly sought to wreck the Talks.
4. The Taoiseach, and other members of the Government side, sought to tease out aspects of the Alliance proposal. The Minister for Justice expressed scepticism about how much preparatory work could be done on the basis of intelligence reports: if we knew exactly where arms were, we'd seize them. She and the Taoiseach both expressed the concern that Sinn Féin would see the establishment of a Commission at this stage as a further precondition or as a departure from the Mitchell report, which identified a necessary linkage between political progress and decommissioning and emphasised that decommissioning would occur only on the basis of a mutual commitment by both sets of paramilitaries. This could jeopardise a restoration of the IRA ceasefire, and thus destroy any prospect of actual decommissioning. Sinn Féin, once in the Talks, could a little later conceivably buy into the idea of a Commission.
5. The Minister for Justice was not sure whether the Commission would in fact bring the situation very much further forward, in the absence of the political conditions required for real progress on the issue. Lord Alderdice responded that at the moment nothing at all had been agreed or was in place. He felt it most unlikely that the IRA would in fact decommission during the Talks, and freely accepted that his approach might therefore merely postpone difficulties. But the creation of a Commission might give some breathing space for momentum to develop on the political side.


6. Mr Teahon suggested that we had already been disappointed by the UUP response to the publication of draft decommissioning legislation. Was there good reason to believe that we might be more successful with a Commission? Lord Alderdice, while indicating that he had been amazed that anyone had seriously expected the draft decommissioning legislation to be sufficient for the UUP, acknowledged that Trimble was unpredictable and less trustworthy than Molyneaux. He was hoping to arrange a trilateral meeting between Alliance, the UUP and SDLP to build a degree of confidence. The Minister for Justice and Mr O'Donnell both reiterated concerns about the tactical use the UUP might make of a Commission. Would they in fact be prepared to sit down with Sinn Féin even after it had been established?
7. In response to Mr Teahon, Lord Alderdice indicated that the liaison arrangement between the Talks and the Commission might, like that between the parties and Strand Three in 1992, be neither very structured or very active.
8. While the question was not directly explored with Lord Alderdice, he made no reference, in his quite lengthy exposition of his idea, to the Commission's having a role in determining the timing of decommissioning.

Position of Sinn Féin

9. Lord Alderdice emphasised the danger, as he saw it, that Sinn Féin could, on one measure or another, outperform the SDLP in either of next year's elections in Northern Ireland. If that were to happen, there would be absolutely no chance of a settlement, bearing in mind the "sufficient consensus" requirement. He felt that the SDLP was, as an organization, very weak; and John Hume regarded its interests as secondary to his wider nationalist political strategy. The Taoiseach agreed that the consequences of such an eventuality could be catastrophic for relations between the two communities, in particular if Sinn Féin remained ambivalent on their relationship with the IRA and on their view of the use of violence. The Irish Government, he said, would work at every level to avoid such an eventuality, and he would so advise all those working for the Government, at every level.
10. The Taoiseach was not sure about the genuineness of Sinn Féin's current exploration of the possibility of a new ceasefire, but argued that in any process people were inevitably tentative. Lord Alderdice made clear that he regarded current speculation about a ceasefire as a cynical exercise: the main purpose was, first to inject uncertainty into the political system and to wreck the chances of the UUP and SDLP moving forward to create a viable political process and, secondly, if a ceasefire were announced, to put maximum pressure on the SDLP and its vote. At the same time Paisley would be strengthened and Trimble weakened. The door should not be shut on Sinn Féin, but progress in the Talks should not be delayed or new concessions made. In this connection, he knew from recent contact with Maze prisoners that the loyalist ceasefire was very unsettled because of fears of a Sinn Féin stranglehold. The Taoiseach felt that this was the context of Gary McMichael's radio interview that morning. He emphasised that any contacts aimed at restoring the ceasefire were purely intended to bring about

peace, not to favour the pursuit of Sinn Féin objectives.

11. Lord Alderdice said that, unlike what had happened in South Africa, there was no basic set of principles or objectives on which all were agreed. The former Taoiseach had indicated that this was to be the purpose of the Joint Declaration: but Sinn Féin had refused to accept it, the Framework Document, or the draft Forum report. He agreed with the Taoiseach that acceptance of the principle of consent by Sinn Féin and the IRA might reduce the pressure on decommissioning, though he cautioned that the impact of such a move would be less now than it would have been at the time of the first ceasefire. The exact wording of any statement was less important than whether it became clear that they actually meant what they said. The Taoiseach, emphasising the particular importance of any IRA statement (as distinct from those by Sinn Féin), agreed that word and deeds would have to be in conformity.
12. The Taoiseach and the Minister for Justice both recalled the importance of and potential value of early Sinn Féin adherence to the Mitchell principles: Lord Alderdice was dismissive, citing the allegedly unpunished breach of the principles during Drumcree, and the way in which the loyalist parties had successfully been able to disclaim responsibility for the threats against Billy Wright.
13. At a couple of points, including at the end of the meeting in response to the Minister for Justice, Lord Alderdice suggested that there might, in effect, be a choice to be made between proceeding with the UUP and waiting for an IRA ceasefire.


 Rory Montgomery
 Department of Foreign Affairs
 21 November 1996