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12 March 1998

From the Principal Private Secretary

See her,

MEETING WITH SINN FEIN, 12 MARCH

The Prime Minister met a Sinn Fein delegation for an hour on the morning of 12 March. Gerry Adams, Barbara De Bruin, Siobhan O'Hanlon, Richard McCaulay and Caoimhghin O'Caolain were there on the Sinn Fein side. Dr Mowlam, Jonathan Powell, Jonathan Stephens and I were there on our side.

The Prime Minister began by saying that he wanted Sinn Fein to be part of the process, as he had all the way through. He had tried to act fairly throughout, and could point to the decisions on Bloody Sunday and Roisin McAliskey as evidence of this. Of course the decision in the McAliskey case was based solely on medical evidence, but the point was that the decision had been taken. But it was impossible for us if violence and talking were going on at the same time. If there were dissident elements in the republican movement trying to destroy Sinn Fein's position in the talks, that was one thing. But if the IRA were implicitly or explicitly authorising violence, we could not accept this, even assuming we wanted to. He believed the Sinn Fein leadership, and a considerable part of Sinn Fein, wanted to be part of a peace process. But if he came to believe that this was not the case, he would not be able to deal with Sinn Fein any more. Dr Mowlam was as impartial as any Northern Ireland Secretary could be. We had only reached the conclusion we had over the Campbell and Dougan murders after looking at the evidence very carefully. That kind of violence was not acceptable, and that was our bottom line. He had thought it better to be frank about this.

Adams said this was fair enough. He did not want to spend too much time on it. He had discussed it at length with Dr Mowlam before. He understood our difficulties, but everybody had difficulties of their own. He did appreciate our decisions on Bloody Sunday and on Roisin McAliskey. But the reality was that

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there was no peace in Northern Ireland, and violence was multi-layered. For example, the British Army had opened fire in his constituency, claiming to be firing at a gunman, and had then admitted there was no gunman. So both sides were involved in this. He did not have control of the IRA. Sinn Fein wanted to use their influence with them and had done so. But there were a lot of double standards around. The two main Loyalist groups were currently in breach of their ceasefire (for example the UDA had clearly been responsible for the video cassette bombs and the Carnlough bomb). Senior Loyalists more or less admitted this, but nothing happened. This had an effect on Sinn Fein's constituency. In one sense the present crisis had started with the Campbell and Dougan murders, but in other ways it had started long before that. Meanwhile Trimble would not even talk to them. This was a huge problem, although he knew the Prime Minister could not solve it. Nevertheless he wanted to be back in the talks, and proposed to say at some point that, as a result of the meeting with the Prime Minister, Sinn Fein did want to be back in at the first opportunity.

Dr Mowlam asked whether a low level team could be at the talks next week. Adams said that he would have to talk to his colleagues. They would probably wait until 23 March. In any case they wanted to be in the end game.

The Prime Minister said that he had put pressure on Trimble to talk to Sinn Fein, and thought Trimble had been close to it before the murders. It was more difficult now. Adams said that Sinn Fein were talking to the UUP in one way, since they were in contact with people around Trimble. These were not politicians, but they thought Trimble should talk to Sinn Fein. After a recent long meeting, one of these people had commented that the meeting had stripped away all his Unionist illusions about Sinn Fein. He did not know whether Trimble would talk to him - he was a right wing leader, although maybe only a right wing leader could make the right compromises - but it was very important for him to be able to say to his own people that the Unionists had eventually begun to talk to them. He knew that the Unionists believed they could only lose once, and that Trimble was terrified of being labelled the Unionist who had sold out the Union.

Dr Mowlam pressed again for Sinn Fein to send a low level team to the talks next week. This would avoid the leaders having to grandstand with each other on 23 March. Adams said he would reflect on this point, but preferred to move on for now. He hoped the Prime Minister would read his thoughtful recent article (he handed over copies). His strategy now was to do everything possible to achieve a common position with the Irish and SDLP, and get the best possible

deal. The Prime Minister had said before that he wanted change but the question was how much change. He realised the Unionists wanted minimal change, but they would have to accommodate themselves to the reality.

He was worried about the Constitutional issue, where what the British appeared to envisage by way of change looked insufficient. It did not touch on the sovereignty issue, for example the Act of Union and the 1920 Government of Ireland Act. We could not have it both ways, and talk about change while actually maintaining the Union, as if we were Ian Paisley. There also had to be changes on the security front, so that people could see change on the ground. If people woke up the day after a settlement, and the RUC, British Army and unacceptable parades were still there, they would not understand. Similarly Sinn Fein, or even the SDLP, could not be part of a settlement while hundreds of prisoners were still inside.

Dr Mowlam said that all these things were on the agenda. On policing, we were working up a strategy for change. On prisoners, we had already refereed to the need for a mechanism for early releases. We could not do some things too early in the process, but they would happen. Cross border bodies would also be there as part of a settlement and could be developed. We were moving forward on the equality agenda, for example the employment equality announcement the previous day and use of the ECHR. In Strand 1 there would be safeguards. So all the issues were on the agenda, even if things were not moving as fast as Sinn Fein would like.

The Prime Minister said that, whatever the institutional arrangements, there was an immense amount of change, for example in areas like policing, which could happen. Prisoners could also be dealt with once we got closer to the end point of the process. On the constitutional side, our position was based on consent. On the institutional issues themselves, we wanted to create a framework which could be developed if people wanted to do so. He saw the choice of 22 May for the referendum, to coincide with the European referendum in the Republic, as symbolic of the idea of developing a whole new set of relationships, more in tune with the modern world. North and South in the island of Ireland had to develop a different relationship. We needed a framework in which both the parties which wanted to keep the union, and those that wanted a united Ireland, could work together. He did not want to minimise the difficulties, but it was possible to create a new vision where the old enmities were less relevant. A different kind of stability was needed from the past. He had read Adams' article and thought it recognised this.

Adams said that reality had to be recognised. The Unionist leadership wanted minimum change. If it was left to the people of the island of Ireland to sort out between themselves, they could do it. But the Unionists had sheltered behind successive British governments and had never had to negotiate. For his part, he had always found his encounters with the Prime Minister intriguing, not least the situation of Irish republicans trying to persuade the British Government to change policy. He hoped the Prime Minister did not suffer from the English disease of being patronising about the mad Irish. Of course there were hatreds on both sides, but what divided them was political allegiances, and different loyalties, not some collective psychological failure. A leap of imagination was now required from the Unionists. In any case it was not in British interest if Adams only brought part of Republicanism with him and left the violent part behind. Some of the securocrats might welcome the removal of pragmatic leadership from the men of violence, but this would be a mistake. He wanted to bring all the movement with him. He thought in some areas it would be relatively easy to come to agreement, subject to delivery on the equality agenda. On cross border bodies, Sinn Fein had moved their position, but these bodies would need real executive power and to deal with real issues, not just tourism. And if there was an opportunity for the Unionists to strangle North/South bodies, they would. This would be legitimate from the Unionist point of view, but they should not be given the chance.

The big difficulties for Sinn Fein were the constitutional issue and the Assembly. They could not live with an interpretation of consent which meant a permanent Unionist veto. Expectations were high among Catholics in the north. They wanted recognition of their Irishness and their place in the sun, particularly the young. So if there was delivery on equality up front, and no "long fingering" on other issues, Sinn Fein could buy into most of the settlement on offer, including cross border arrangements. But they needed to be clearer about the constitutional aspects and the Assembly. He hoped the Prime Minister recognised how far Republicanism had moved, even from what they had been saying when the Prime Minister had taken office. It had been a learning process for Sinn Fein, as for others. All they were really asking for was a minimum level playing field. There was still much structural inequality in Northern Ireland and that had to be reversed now. Successive British Governments had talked about this and produced reports about it but had not been effective. Affirmative action programmes in the US on the other hand had had real teeth.

Dr Mowlam said that the position on, for example, employment equality was rather more complex than Adams allowed for. A lot had been achieved already. On the wider issues, the timescale was important. We had to have a referendum and elections before the long hot summer. There had to be enough on the table for both communities to hold on to through that summer. Adams said that those Sinn Fein represented did not want to be under British rule, but the reality was that they were. That meant the situation favoured the Unionist majority. Britain ended up defending the status quo whether we liked it or not. That was why Sinn Fein had to say any settlement was only a transition.

The Prime Minister said that consent could be defined in different ways. But a majority of those in the Irish Republic did not think it would be possible to move to a united Ireland without the consent of the majority in the North. It was impossible to persuade people to go down this road without peace and stability. Embracing the consent principle might be too hard for Sinn Fein, but if they did, it would be hard for the Unionists not to engage with them. It was possible for Sinn Fein to disagree with the principle of consent, but it was also a simple reality. If we looked 50 years into the future, people in Europe would be gradually coming closer together, and things which had seemed of fundamental historical importance would seem less relevant. He saw his own task as being to facilitate a framework where people could go in the direction they wanted to go.

De Bruin commented that Europe was about giving up sovereignty in return for something else of value. If there was no sovereignty to give up, this changed the issue. Sinn Fein were being asked to accept what they believed was unacceptable, and to give consent to this. The Prime Minister said that he was not saying that Sinn Fein had to consent to partition, but to the proposition that change could only come about through persuasion.

Adams returned to the constitution. Jonathan Stephens said that we would act in accordance with the view that we had no selfish strategic interest of our own in Northern Ireland, and make clearer that there was a practical route to a united Ireland. This would accord with the views of John Hume. Adams said he was not comfortable with the way the response to his question had been left to an official. The point was that Britain had sovereignty over Northern Ireland. It was not clear whether we wanted this or not.

Dr Mowlam said we would obviously be tackling the 1920 and 1973 Acts, but she did not want to set out our precise position at this stage. This would have to be looked at in the negotiations. Adams responded that there had to be a balanced constitutional settlement, and the British view had to be clear. What about the Act of Union? Britain's claim was not notional, but involved real sovereignty.

Jonathan Powell said that the Act of Union could be modified by subsequent legislation. I added that our basic intention would be to make clear that, if the position of the majority in Northern Ireland changed, we would be ready to give effect to that change. Adams said that it would be helpful if we could make our views clearer, including in public. We had to recognise that we were players in this, not just referees. Dr Mowlam accepted that there was a case for more detailed exchanges about this between constitutional experts. Adams said that he was not an expert, but was not comfortable with anything which would institutionalise the Unionist veto. There had to be a root and branch change in the legislation, so that it was clear what the British view was.

Caoimhghin O'Caolain said that the discussion had revealed that we thought about Northern Ireland as something "over there". But there was a British public view on this too, which wanted to see a better relationship between the two islands and was in favour of the kind of solution the Republicans sought. He believed that the situation had been enormously damaged by Sinn Fein's expulsion from the talks. If there was any repetition, there would be insurmountable difficulties. The Sinn Fein mandate had to be respected. Meanwhile he wanted to raise two specific issues. On prisoners, five were still in Britain, although they had been cleared for repatriation. Their cases were on the Home Secretary's desk. Two others, Kelly and Murphy, had also had applications on the Home Secretary's desk for a month. Another, McHugh, had sought a transfer. Speedy movement on these cases would be very helpful. He also wanted to raise the difficulties created by the militarisation of the border areas, as a TD representing a border constituency in the Republic. Huge amounts of security work were going on, even during the ceasefire, and this sent a very bad signal.

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From: G D Ferguson, RID
Date: 12 March 1998

Comment

The meeting had to break at this point, to allow the Prime Minister to leave for the European Conference Summit. The atmosphere of the discussion was generally good, and Adams seemed to go out of his way to take a conciliatory line. His emphasis on the difficulties of the constitutional issue and the Assembly was noteworthy, but it was difficult to understand exactly what he was driving at over the constitution. This needs more exploration.

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

PRIME MINISTER'S MEETING WITH MR TRIMBLE: STRAND 3

1. Today's Irish Times suggests that at this afternoon's meeting Mr Trimble will raise his unhappiness with the British and Irish Governments' paper on Strand 3, tabled yesterday (copy attached).

2. Our original draft outlined the "Intergovernmental Council/Council of the Islands" and proposed "standing intergovernmental machinery", similar to the existing IGO/Secretariat (currently at Maryfield). The latter would also develop and coordinate topics not related to Northern Ireland. Irish officials were not ready to discuss this at a meeting arranged for the purpose on 6 March. An Irish revision of 10 March broadly accepted the "Intergovernmental Council/Council of the Islands" section but excised the "standing intergovernmental machinery" section to relate to Northern Ireland issues alone. After extended discussions it was agreed (i) that a conference/secretariat structure relating to Northern Ireland alone could be put forward for discussion; (ii) that this could form part of a wider British Irish Intergovernmental Council also covering other bilateral issues; and (iii), at our insistence, it was made clear that the parties' views were being sought on the section relating to the standing intergovernmental machinery.

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