

The Exploratory Dialogues

– Building Towards the Good Friday Agreement

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October 2026

1. The Good Friday Agreement, whose 25th anniversary was celebrated in 2023, was the culmination of a series of initiatives which helped build the platform for its successful negotiation. Among these, an important if occasionally overlooked element was the two sets of exploratory dialogue held in 1994 – 1995 between the British Government and Sinn Féin on the one hand and the loyalist political parties - the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) and the Ulster Democratic Party (UDP) - on the other. As a key milestone in the process - described by Gerry Adams as the first official talks between republicans and the British since Partition¹- these dialogues started at official level but eventually included the first formal meetings between a British Minister (Michael Ancram, the NIO Minister of State in John Major's government) and the three paramilitary-linked parties. These meetings were a transformative step in the process. This article looks in more detail at those dialogues, drawing on the author's experience as the leader of

¹ Gerry Adams, "*Historic Talks between SF and British*", Irish Times, 10 December 1994, p. 1. There was however a meeting involving the then Secretary of State in 1972 – see note 11 below.

the official team at LXD (the loyalist dialogue) and deputy head of the team at the Sinn Fein dialogue (XD).

Background

2. The peace process from which the exploratory dialogues and political talks emerged was not a linear journey but was rather (to quote Paul Bew) “[a] long, ambiguous march ... into constitutional politics”.² Notable milestones included the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement, which strengthened cross-border cooperation and recognized the Irish Government’s role in putting forward its views on issues in Northern Ireland. Then the inter-party dialogue in 1991/92, partly chaired by an eminent Australian jurist, formalized the three stranded model and showed the value of having an independent international chair for sensitive political talks. Discussions involving the Governments and the parties (including between the SDLP and Sinn Fein) together with close cooperation between the Governments, led to the Downing St Declaration issued by the Prime Minister John Major and the Taoiseach Albert Reynolds in December 1993, which succeeded in encouraging the Republican movement to progress while keeping the unionists on board.³
3. Specifically, the Declaration committed both Governments to the key constitutional principle that the consent of the majority of people in Northern Ireland was required before any change of sovereignty could

² Paul Bew, *Ireland: The Politics of Enmity 1789-2006* (Oxford, 2007) p.535

³ *Joint Declaration on Peace* (London, Prime Minister’s Office), 15 December 1993

come about; and the Irish Government also promised that, as part of an overall settlement, it would support changes to the Irish Constitution which would address elements that were deeply resented by Northern unionists (in particular, the claim to sovereignty over Northern Ireland in Articles 2 & 3). For its part the UK Government stated that it had “no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland” (a formulation in which the absence of a comma after “selfish” was crucial). The Governments also made clear that, following a cessation of violence, democratically mandated parties which had established a commitment to exclusively peaceful methods and the democratic process, could participate fully in democratic politics and join in all-party talks on the way ahead. This was a clear prompt to Sinn Fein and the loyalists, and the two ceasefires which followed – PIRA’s “complete cessation of military activity” announced on 31 August 1994 followed by the ceasefire declaration from the Combined Loyalist Military Command (CLMC) on 13 October - opened the way for further progress.

4. In particular, the ceasefires enabled the Government to make a working assumption that the terrorist groups meant to give up violence for good. But that assumption had to be tested. There had been ceasefires in the past that had collapsed in recrimination. Unionists pointed out that, even if PIRA’s ceasefire was “complete”, it was not declared to be “permanent”, with no guarantee that PIRA wouldn’t revert to violence if the political route did not yield the outcomes they

wanted. (As one unionist remarked, when driving he came to a complete stop at a red light, but not a permanent one.)

5. To achieve the more concrete assurance which they wanted, unionists sought the relinquishment or “decommissioning” of all terrorist weapons. Perhaps too readily, the Major Government adopted decommissioning as a necessary proxy for a permanent ceasefire, reasoning that there was no need for weapons if the Republican movement genuinely accepted that the armed struggle had run its course. But logical though this was, the call to decommission underestimated the spectrum of opinion among republicans and (crucially) the fact that PIRA weapons were mainly stored in deep hides in the Republic, which were physically controlled by hardline quartermasters who mistrusted the political approach and saw decommissioning of the weapons they had guarded so jealously as equivalent to surrender. It is arguable whether a more historically sensitive formula, perhaps akin to the order to “dump arms” given to the anti-Treaty forces by their leaders in 1923, which effectively ended the Civil War, might have been more successful, although some element of verification would probably still have been needed. (It is notable that “dump arms” was the instruction given by PIRA to its units when decommissioning was eventually implemented in July 2005.)⁴

⁴ IRA Statement on Ending of the Armed Campaign, 28 July 2005 (Dublin), CAIN Archive

Setting Up the Exploratory Dialogues

6. Once decommissioning was promulgated as the gateway to progress, it quickly became a controversial issue. In the short term, achieving actual decommissioning was out of reach, but nonetheless some mechanism for showing movement was essential if the process was to avoid stalling. This was a major factor in leading the Government to establish the exploratory dialogues with Sinn Fein (XD) and the two loyalist parties (LXD). The stated purposes of the dialogues were:
 - a. to exchange views on how the parties associated with the paramilitaries would be able over a period to play the same part as the current constitutional parties in the public life of Northern Ireland; and
 - b. to examine the practical consequences of the ending of violence, including the safe removal and disposal of illegally held weapons and explosives, and to clarify the parties' attitude to the use of violence in any circumstances.

In order to build mutual understanding and avoid a stalemate on the central issues of illegal arms and political development, the Government also invited discussion on prisoners and on wider economic and social topics, to give more scope to develop common ground and help bring the dialogues to a successful conclusion.

7. On venue, we decided to hold the meetings in Parliament Buildings at Stormont, which provided ample free space (some of which could be used as delegation rooms for the parties), good security and proximity

to the Secretary of State's offices in Stormont Castle. Some initial concern that Sinn Fein would be reluctant to meet in a location which had considerable symbolism for unionists proved unfounded, and indeed Sinn Fein enjoyed the counter-symbolism of entering the building amid much media focus.

8. On the loyalist side, I wrote to Alderman Hugh Smith, the leader of the Progressive Unionist Party (though in practice Billy Hutchinson and David Ervine led for the PUP) and to Councillor Gary McMichael, the leader of the Ulster Democratic Party (UDP), on 8 December 1994 to invite them to a first meeting on the following week; while Quentin Thomas, the NIO Political Director and leading strategist of the process, wrote similarly to Sinn Fein inviting them to a first meeting on 9 December. We indicated that both sides could make and publish opening statements which could then be discussed, but that otherwise we proposed that the dialogue should remain confidential. Both invitations stressed that continuing participation in the talks would depend on good faith in continuing to address all the issues, including decommissioning and opposition to the use of violence.

Start of Sinn Fein Exploratory Dialogue (XD)

9. At the first meeting of XD on 9 December 1994, Quentin Thomas led a team of six NIO officials including myself. We agreed beforehand that we would shake hands if Sinn Fein sought to do so (they did), but

thereafter would maintain formality (Mr, Ms etc.) The Sinn Fein delegation was led by Martin McGuinness and included Gerry Kelly (who took occasional notes but hardly ever spoke), Sean MacManus, Lucilita Bhreatnach and Siobhan O’Hanlon. (At some later meetings Bairbre de Brun substituted for Lucilita Bhreatnach, while Caoimhin O’Caolain joined the Sinn Fein team when economic issues were under discussion.) As Quentin Thomas opened the meeting, McGuinness cut in to ask after “Fred” – alluding to an intermediary during earlier contacts involving the republican movement. After dealing with this, Thomas delivered a comprehensive opening statement underlining the opportunity which the dialogue offered for Sinn Fein to be admitted to an inclusive political talks process and play the same part as the current constitutional parties in the public life of Northern Ireland. While we respected Sinn Fein’s democratic mandate, supporting democracy carried responsibilities as well as conferring rights. It was still necessary that the Government and the other political parties should be satisfied of Sinn Fein’s abiding commitment to exclusively peaceful methods and the democratic process, which had to include steps to remove all illegal weapons and explosives.

10. In response, Martin McGuinness argued that there should be an immediate move into all-party talks and that the exploratory dialogue was a stalling tactic to avoid recognising the rights of Sinn Fein’s electorate. The Government was bowing to the “unionist veto” – although at the same time (a little inconsistently) he said that Sinn Fein

accepted the principle of consent and were willing to use what influence they had in a positive way to advance the process. Sinn Fein then passed over a paper (entitled “Towards a Negotiated Settlement”, or TANS) listing several questions about the all-party talks, to which we subsequently replied and posed our own questions. (Generally, the XD dialogue was more structured and documented than LXD, reflecting Sinn Fein’s more disciplined and less freewheeling approach compared with the loyalist parties.)

Start of Loyalist Exploratory Dialogue (LXD)

11. I chaired the first LXD meeting on 15 December, when we met with five-strong delegations from each party: the PUP was led by Billy Hutchinson and David Ervine, with William “Plum” Smith, Lindsay Robb and Jackie Mahood, while the UDP team comprised Gary McMichael accompanied by Joe English, John White, Tommy Kirkham and David Adams. In my opening statement I stressed the opportunity which the Talks offered to build on the cessation of violence and establish a lasting and fair settlement. Depending on the progress of our dialogue, this effort could include a role for the PUP and UDP, taking account among other things of their electoral mandate. The Government side acknowledged that it could be problematic for the two loyalist parties to join in Talks on an equal footing with larger parties which had much greater electoral support, but we believed that it might be possible to

find a specific mechanism to achieve this in parallel with progress in the exploratory dialogue.

12. I went on to say that while violence had not brought the PUP and UDP to the table, it had created the need for exploratory dialogue before they could enter normal political life (consistent with their mandates) and deal with Ministers. The continuation and completion of the dialogue would depend on the CLMC continuing to adhere to its ceasefire and on the loyalist political representatives demonstrating a commitment to exclusively peaceful methods and the democratic process. One of the clearest demonstrations of adherence to this principle would be the safe removal and disposal of illegally held weapons and explosives. While we recognized that this was a difficult and sensitive area, we wanted to work with the parties to

- reach agreement in principle that arms should be decommissioned.
- reach a common understanding of the mechanics of doing so; and
- get the process underway through some actual decommissioning of weapons as a tangible confidence building measure.

These three steps were subsequently set out formally by the Secretary of State (Sir Patrick Mayhew) in the USA in March 1995 (the “Washington Three”). Also important to the success of the dialogue would be the clarification of the PUP's and UDP's attitude to the use of violence in any circumstances and of their relationship to the CLMC.

13. In response, the parties argued that it was wrong to focus solely on the extent of their electoral support: they had a “latent mandate” stemming from their role in the community, which should not be confined just to the question of arms. To make progress on this and other issues, Government flexibility on prisoner questions would be of great help. (The regime and possible future developments for paramilitary prisoners was a recurring theme in the two Dialogues, with both Sinn Fein and the loyalists pressing for radical measures right up to a general amnesty.)
14. The two parties also said that in future they wanted to have separate meetings with the Government team, rather than a joint one, to recognise their individual identity. I said that I was not authorised to offer this, but we would facilitate the parties to express their individual views within the overall framework. The united front which they had operated hitherto had served them well (for example through the CLMC ceasefire) and there seemed no point in fragmenting the unity which had brought them to this point. If the parties split that would be the big story for the media, which would overshadow the progress they had made to date. They agreed to reflect further on this - and in the event did not pursue the point.
15. At the second LXD meeting on 23 December 1994, I began by condemning the sectarian murder of Noel Lyness which had taken

place in Belfast on the previous day. The two parties joined in this condemnation. The PUP then expressed anxiety about comments made by Albert Reynolds, the departing Taoiseach, on the Framework Documents which were then being finalised. We urged them to wait for the completed documents and stressed that widespread acceptability would continue to be a requirement for political progress. We also tabled a paper for future discussion on the modalities of decommissioning, and agreed to draw up a workplan for the dialogue, to include prisons issues as well as political development and illegal weapons.

16. We made moderate progress at the next two LXD meetings on 12 and 25 January 1995. On the 12th, we primarily discussed prisons, which was clearly the key issue for the loyalist parties, while for the Government the disposal of illegal arms was the priority. We made clear that there could be no question of bartering progress in one area for the other and exchanging prisoners for arms. But there was the potential for parallel progress, if the exploratory dialogue and the actions taken by the loyalist parties created confidence. Some regime enhancements had already been made – for example, relating to Compassionate Home Leave terms and 24 hour unlock – and the Northern Ireland prison regime was already seen as generous compared with that in Great Britain. However, if further steps were to be taken, a key factor would be the level of compliance by loyalist prisoners with the requirements of the regime. Whatever their

grievances, rooftop protests and other disorderly behaviour were clearly counterproductive and would inevitably delay further progress. While acknowledging this, the parties stressed the combustible effects in the loyalist communities of perceived ill treatment in the prisons.

17. The parties went on to argue that with the CLMC ceasefire there was no longer a case for continuing to detain prisoners whose motivation had been primarily “political”. We said that there was insufficient evidence that the risks of violence had truly diminished. There had been ceasefires in the past which had lasted longer than the current one; and there were also examples of released prisoners becoming reinvolved in terrorism. While in the future Ministers might judge that further regime enhancements, possibly including remission or parole changes, were possible in a context of confidence and commitment to democratic principles, that stage had not yet been reached.

18. The 4th meeting on 25 January included our first serious address to the arms issue, with the discussion also encompassing a significant exchange on political development. I reiterated that there was no question of trading prisoners for arms: the Government would treat all the issues on their merits. All the same, no issue existed in a vacuum, and it was not wrong to discern linkages between arms, security matters, the prospects for political progress and the other issues which exploratory dialogue was addressing. The parties had played an

important role in brokering and maintaining the CLMC ceasefire, and if that initiative could be developed wider progress was possible.

19. Replying, the parties (Hutchinson and McMichael) argued that the fact that guns were now silent, thanks in part to their efforts, merited some reciprocal gesture, particularly in respect of prisoners. The ceasefire could not be taken for granted – and the constitutional politicians were not helping the process by making unrealistic demands on decommissioning and stoking fears about the forthcoming Framework Document. We said that there had to be progress on arms: this issue could not be left until everything else had been resolved to the loyalists' satisfaction. At the same time, we recognized the difficulties and were not asking for the moon. A realistic first step would be some evidence of intent and a common understanding on timing and mechanics.

20. Against that background, we had a preliminary discussion on the three options for decommissioning which we had indicated in our paper:

- direct handing over of weapons to the security forces;
- recovery of weapons for subsequent destruction from a specified location where the terrorists had left them; or
- destruction of weapons by the terrorists themselves, with appropriate verification.

We noted that legislation would be required to make provision for those handling weapons as part of a decommissioning scheme, and there would also be issues around forensic testing of weapons and the territorial extent of any scheme. (Extension of a scheme to Great Britain would, for example, be problematic, because of the risk the Home Office saw that criminals might take advantage of such a scheme to dispose of their own weapons.) But for that legislation to proceed the Government would need to have confidence that there would be a positive outcome.

21. The PUP and UDP recognised that LXD was a major opportunity for them, but they were also anxious that they might be used simply as a counterweight to Sinn Féin – “bit players” as Ervine said, who with only a small popular mandate risked being cast aside once the arms card had been played. However, as trust between us grew these concerns diminished. The positives in the loyalist position were their willingness to engage - with Ervine being a passionate but shrewd advocate and McMichael, Hutchinson and Davy Adams also making important contributions. At our 5th meeting on 6 February, for example, away from the logjam of decommissioning, they showed real understanding of how economic and social decline and the erosion of traditional industries had led to severe unemployment and poor educational attainment, not only in loyalist areas but across the board; and were comfortable discussing even such esoteric

issues as the differential impact of the Robson index of deprivation on loyalist and nationalist areas.

22. Crucially, the loyalist parties wanted to show that they could operate on a bigger stage and were not solely defined by the issue of illegal arms. They therefore took real interest in building a wider dialogue. And the exchanges with them were laced with a degree of humour absent from XD - for example, when a tipper lorry dumped a load of gravel at the back of Parliament Buildings just as we had finished setting out the reasoned case for decommissioning, Joe English remarked “we're persuaded - that was the first instalment”! And there was also some amusement when our discussion on arms at the 6 February meeting was punctuated by a 21-gun salute to mark the 43rd anniversary of the Queen’s accession.

23. The PUP and UDP also frankly accepted that they had a channel of communication with and some influence over the UVF and UDA leaderships. However this relationship was clearly not without tension, and the parties evidently felt under pressure to produce results against a backdrop of what they alleged was PIRA’s continued fundraising and targeting activity. Particular strain emerged at the 7th meeting of LXD on 13 March 1995. The parties were irate that Gerry Adams had not only been allowed into the USA a second time but also invited to the White House St Patrick’s Day Reception to meet President Clinton, before any statement had been made on arms by the IRA. In contrast the loyalists had not even met UK Ministers and had been “fobbed off” with minor security changes. If

Gerry Adams could meet Clinton, the PUP and UDP should have a meeting with the Prime Minister. Nor were they reassured by the now-published Framework Document.⁵ I stressed in response that the Framework was a balanced document and their fears were misplaced; and also that Adams was actually in a position of weakness, not strength. Irvine said that perceptions in the loyalist community nonetheless counted for a great deal. He then tabled (with some embarrassment, and clearly prompted by Lindsay Robb) a bellicose press release under the name of the UVF threatening to abandon the ceasefire if action was not taken to stop continuing IRA targeting and accept demands on loyalist prisoners.

24. I said that Ministers would be highly concerned to hear of this document, since the whole basis of the exploratory dialogue was that all parties had to show that they were exclusively committed to democratic methods. To threaten us with the resumption of violence was not the way forward, and would jeopardise the progress the PUP had made and its future prospects. With some alacrity, Irvine said that the statement had been prepared by Robb “as a contingency” and was not being formally issued, and he then retrieved all the copies which had been handed round. McMichael pointedly said that for its part the UDP remained totally committed to peace and the political process. We said that the loyalists had the prize of ministerial involvement in their hands, provided they showed a real commitment to address the arms issue constructively and seriously: that was the smart way for them to go.

⁵ *Framework Documents* (London, Prime Minister’s Office), 22 February 1995

25. Discussing this incident afterwards, the Government side appreciated that it reflected tensions between the UVF in Belfast and its mid-Ulster Brigade, with which Robb was associated. (These tensions subsequently led to the formation of the LVF led by Billy Wright.) Robb was not representative of the PUP delegation, which clearly valued the opportunity to engage with Government and understood the significance of decommissioning (even if they were unlikely to be able to deliver substantive progress in that area in advance of the IRA). If the dialogue was to avoid deadlock on the arms issue, which in turn would endanger the ceasefires, we had to sustain its momentum.

26. In discussion with officials, the Minister (Michael Ancram MP) reviewed the position and noted the broadly positive approach which the loyalist parties had taken. It was agreed that we should seek written confirmation from the PUP and DUP that they would do their utmost to explore ways to achieve the decommissioning of illegal weapons, and I accordingly wrote to them on 20 March 1995 seeking confirmation that they would be genuinely constructive on the key issues. In reply, the PUP replied positively that “the Government should be firmly assured of our good faith” in seeking resolutions to the problems we faced, in the belief that it was in the interests of society as a whole “for all illegal materials of war to be removed as quickly as possible to the satisfaction of all concerned.” The UDP initially replied baldly that they accepted the agenda, which was clearly inadequate. I said that if Ministers were to have confidence in their position, they needed to show a good deal more commitment, particularly on making progress towards decommissioning. A second more positive

letter was accordingly forthcoming, promising to be genuinely constructive and condemning paramilitary violence.

Ministerial Entry to LXD

27. On that basis, Michael Ancram and the Secretary of State (with the approval of the Prime Minister) decided that the necessary tests for Ministerial entry had been met; and Ancram joined the loyalist exploratory dialogue and led the Government side at the 8th meeting of LXD on 22 March 1995. (In a positive juxtaposition much noted in the press, the first Army unit to be withdrawn in the wake of the ceasefires (5th Regiment RA) flew out on the same day.) This development - as the first formal occasion at which a Minister had met the loyalist parties - was a very significant milestone in the process. To maintain focus, the agenda for this meeting included a substantial item on the decommissioning of arms, covering in particular the modalities, e.g.

- i procedures for verification
- ii independent supervision of destruction
- iii methods
- iv practical and legal considerations
- v timing.

Michael Ancram noted that effective verification (perhaps including an international element) would be particularly important in building trust and confidence. Ervine agreed, and on a lighter note asked if the 1993 Teesport arms seizure could be regarded retrospectively as the start of loyalist decommissioning? We said that this was an ingenious idea, but to build

confidence the putting of illegal weapons beyond use would clearly have to be voluntary. I added that the loyalists should not overlook that the first side to move on arms would reap major credit. The press statement following the meeting (pre-agreed with the parties' leadership) recorded that there had been a serious and constructive discussion on illegal weapons, which would be continued in detail at a future meeting. Both the parties, while reaffirming that they had no control over illegal arms, acknowledged their "influential relationship with the CLMC" and undertook to use their best endeavours to find resolutions on this and other problems. Michael Ancram stressed that progress on a number of fronts would depend on a continuing constructive approach by the loyalist parties.

28. The dialogue with the loyalists continued into the summer of 1995, covering a range of issues. For example:

29 March 1995 – LXD 9. Following searches in the Maze, UVF prisoners had rioted on 14 March and there had been attacks on the homes of prison officers. Michael Ancram strongly condemned these attacks and stressed that continuing adherence to the ceasefire was essential to the continuation of the Dialogue. The parties agreed and claimed to be working "feverishly" to pacify prisoners' families. It would greatly help them if there could be some concession on neuralgic issues such as the deployment of the IRF (Immediate Reaction Force, which responded to violence in the wings). Ancram proposed the establishment of a prisons sub-group, chaired by John Steele, to consider such detailed issues, and this was accepted with alacrity. On policing (the nominal focus of this meeting), the parties argued for greater community accountability for the RUC, with more resources being put into combating drugs and the repeal of some of

the emergency legislation. Michael Ancram said that the emergency laws had to be retained while they were needed, which meant while paramilitaries remained intact and had access to weapons. But the Government was certainly open to considering RUC reform and other normalization measures, dependent on progress.

7 April 1995 – LXD10. The loyalists voiced concern that continuing INLA activity was a factor in the UDA's reluctance to move on decommissioning. Separately, they wanted EU funding (the “Delors Peace Money”) channelled directly to communities rather than going through intermediary quangos such as the Tourist Board who (unlike the parties) did not understand the real needs of loyalist communities. They favoured single identity funding to build resource in their communities, rather than focusing on cross-community projects where loyalists often lost out to more highly organised nationalist groups. Michael Ancram explained the necessary safeguards around EU resources, but said that he would bear in mind the points made.

Sinn Fein Exploratory Dialogue

29. The path to Ministerial involvement in the Sinn Fein dialogue was more problematic. McGuinness stuck to the line that the Government had foregrounded the decommissioning issue as a stalling tactic to deny the rights of Sinn Fein's electorate. Sinn Fein had an electoral mandate, but no guns, and the best way to make progress on weapons was to address that issue in the context of expeditious all-party talks. Everyone had an influence over the present situation, and inclusive talks would enable that influence to be used. Sinn Fein continued to stress this argument, although they also made several well-

researched points on prisons, parity of esteem, the Irish language (particularly Irish medium education), and economic development.

30. For our part, the Government side made clear that we had no wish to establish any preconditions to Sinn Fein's involvement in multi-party negotiations (other than those set out in the Downing St Declaration). But equally, it was a political reality that such negotiations were not going to take place unless and until substantial progress had been made on the issue of decommissioning arms. Otherwise, the unionists would not participate. Sinn Fein had said that it was as a part - or a consequence - of multi-party Talks that the removal of the gun from Irish politics would take place. However, it was not clear how Sinn Fein envisaged that this would be achieved, since PIRA would not be among the participants at such talks, and Sinn Fein were refusing to discuss the modalities of decommissioning. While the Government was not exclusively focussed on this issue – and was happy to discuss other issues such as prisons and a paper on proposed Ground Rules for the wider Talks (which McGuinness welcomed and said he would put to the Ard Chomhairle), the question of decommissioning could not be ducked. Sinn Fein disclaimed this analysis and fell back on reiterating that they had no weapons and we should therefore contact PIRA if we wanted to discuss decommissioning. They also urged that Ministers should come in to lead the Government team. Quentin Thomas replied that the Government had never sought to determine the composition of the Sinn Fein team. Ministers would decide the appropriate point to join the exploratory dialogue in the light of progress made in tackling the key issues.

31. To avoid the risk of stonewalling and stalemate on the arms issue, the Government side decided to focus on Sinn Fein's acknowledgment (in their opening statement) that “everyone had an influence over the present situation” and that Sinn Fein wanted to use “such influence as they had” to help create the environment in which all guns could be removed. We said that we were perhaps more sanguine than Sinn Fein themselves about the potential scope of this influence, and believed that some episodes in the past supported this. For example, in Sinn Fein's own record of the communications exchanged with the Government in 1993, Gerry Adams was quoted (at a press conference on 29 November 1993) as saying that in May 1993 “Sinn Fein sought and was given a commitment from the leadership of the Irish Republican Army that it would suspend operations for two weeks ...”⁶ And again, Adams said on 29 August 1994 that he had met the IRA Army Council and given them his updated assessment that the current political climate provided the potential to break “the political, constitutional and military stalemate”. The Army Council had promised a “speedy response”, and the IRA cessation of military operations had followed on 31 August 1994.⁷ Taking these points into account, we believed that there was strong evidence for “Sinn Fein’s ability to gauge accurately the IRA’s attitudes and to exercise influence over its actions.”⁸ Even if there were limits to that influence, it must surely be possible for Sinn Fein to pass questions on the decommissioning issue to the IRA and communicate their response back to the Government.

32. We planned to pursue this theme at the 6th meeting of the Dialogue on 9 February. But, just before that began, there was an unexpected development.

⁶ *Statement by Sinn Fein President, Gerry Adams*, 29 November 1993, Sinn Fein Press Centre, Belfast

⁷ Brian Rowan, “*Going to the Edge*”, Belfast, 1995, CAIN Chronology.

⁸ Government paper handed over on 16 January 1995 during 5th meeting XD.

Martin McGuinness asked to see the head and deputy head of the Government team in Sinn Fein's delegation rooms. When Quentin Thomas and I went there, McGuinness said that a scanning device which Sinn Fein had in their possession had picked up a positive signal from a copier in their delegation rooms. One of the Sinn Fein team demonstrated this by moving the scanner close to the copier, producing a beep. In response, we said that the rooms should be sealed immediately and the matter investigated. The rooms were accordingly vacated and locked under the continuing observation of members of the Sinn Fein delegation. Both sides agreed that the meeting should not take place that day but be postponed to a future date.

33. This development understandably attracted much media speculation on the issue of whether the Sinn Fein delegation rooms were indeed being monitored. Normally, the Government would meet any query about alleged intelligence matters by saying that it would “neither confirm nor deny” any such allegation. But unusually on this occasion, Ministers decided to make clear that any implication that the rooms were being monitored by or on behalf of the Government was without foundation, and Michael Ancram underlined this at a rapidly arranged press conference in Stormont Castle.

34. We reflected afterwards that the delay caused by this incident may have been convenient for the Sinn Fein leadership in managing their Ard Fheis later that month – the first Ard Fheis since the IRA ceasefire, which Gerry Adams acknowledged in his Presidential address had been “unsettling, difficult and traumatic ... for many republicans”⁹. It might have increased the trauma if in

⁹ Presidential Address by Gerry Adams to the Sinn Fein Ard Fheis, 25 February 1995 (*Dublin*). CAIN: Chronology.

parallel with the Ard Fheis the leadership had been under active pressure to discuss the logistics of decommissioning weapons at meetings with the Government. However, whatever the truth of this incident, we hoped to move on from it and resume the Dialogue as soon as possible. The delegation rooms were carefully examined and all the office furniture swept for electronic devices by the Forensic Science Laboratory, with nothing suspicious discovered. However, Sinn Fein refused to accept these findings, on the basis that NIFSL was not impartial (in fact, while publicly funded, it was and is operationally independent). At a meeting with Gerry Kelly and Siobhan O’Hanlon, I reiterated that any suggestion that the Sinn Fein rooms were being monitored was unfounded (to which Kelly replied that, while he was not doubting our word, the Government was “not monolithic”). I proposed a range of alternative ways forward, including the use of commercial consultants or even European forensic laboratories. However, none of the options I suggested were acceptable to Sinn Fein – while they claimed to want to progress, in practice Gerry Kelly seemed happy enough for the dialogue to remain suspended rather than addressing the scope for Sinn Fein to communicate constructively with the IRA about decommissioning.

35. The Government side also used this pause in proceedings to take stock. The dialogue had produced several positives – including the normalization of meetings and discussions between Sinn Fein and UK Government officials; a relatively constructive approach from the UDP and PUP which in due course enabled Michael Ancram to join LXD; and the exploration of a range of important issues including prisoners and the economy. But on the other hand, we had not made substantive progress on the key issue of weapons, and the Washington 3 goal of “the actual decommissioning of some arms”, to build confidence and signal the

start of the political process, still looked remote, an obstacle to progress rather than an enabler.

36. Progress in the Dialogue was also complicated shortly after the abortive 9 February XD meeting by the publication on 22 February (after an earlier leak) of the two Governments' Framework Document. This ambitious scene-setter for multi-party Talks occasioned a strong adverse reaction from unionists, particularly the UUP, and unsurprisingly failed in the short term to take the very difficult trick of "... [persuading] republicans to believe that a settlement which was transitional to Irish unity was close at hand, while encouraging unionists that the process would guarantee their place in the United Kingdom ..."¹⁰ In this volatile atmosphere, it was important to move forward, lest between Sinn Fein stalling over arms and unionist suspicions aroused by the Framework Document the whole process started to unravel.

37. The key issue was clearly decommissioning. The loyalist parties had been able to give the necessary commitment to work constructively towards substantial progress on arms, and that had led to Ministerial entry. After discussion within Government and some exchanges with Sinn Fein, the Prime Minister decided that Sinn Fein also had shown that they were willing to explore how decommissioning could be achieved, as part of their stated commitment to exclusively peaceful and constitutional methods. Accordingly, on the clear understanding that this would facilitate progress in decommissioning illegal arms, Michael Ancram, the Minister of State, joined the Sinn Fein dialogue and chaired the Government side at the 6th

¹⁰ Bew, *Ireland: The Politics of Enmity*, p. 545

meeting of XD on 10 May 1995. This was widely hailed by the media as a historic development – the first Ministerial talks with Sinn Fein for more than 20 years.¹¹

38. A significant portion of the 10 May meeting naturally focussed on the arms issue. Sinn Fein reaffirmed their commitment to exclusively peaceful and constitutional methods, and to bringing about the removal of all weapons, including IRA weapons. It was agreed to discuss the issues again in more detail at a future meeting, based on a paper which the Government tabled, covering such issues as methods of decommissioning, verification, supervision and the legal dimension. (This also reflected input from the Irish Government). On wider issues, McGuinness reiterated the republican belief that they should be treated equally with other parties because of their electoral mandate. Michael Ancram said that while the government fully accepted that Sinn Fein had such a mandate, the Exploratory Dialogue was necessary to test that they were fully committed to democratic values and methods. However he was able to announce that – subject to the Dialogue continuing - the Government would consider on their merits requests from Sinn Fein representatives to meet ministers and officials.

39. Among the other issues addressed at this meeting, Ancram condemned so-called punishment beatings as well as the murder of Mickey Mooney, reportedly a leading drug dealer, in Belfast on 29 April. (This killing had some of the hallmarks of a PIRA operation, although it was never claimed and there were no ballistic traces.) He pressed for Sinn Fein to use their influence to bring all such violence to

¹¹E.g. Irish Times, *"The short, bloody road from Cheyne Walk to Stormont"* (Dublin, 11 May 1995) p. 7. The last face to face talks had taken place in July 1972, when William Whitelaw, the then Secretary of State, met a group of senior republicans (including Adams and McGuinness) in Cheyne Walk in London, in a house owned by Paul Channon, then NIO Minister of State.

an end. McGuinness said that he neither advocated nor condoned punishment beatings. He disclaimed any knowledge of the Mooney attack and reiterated Sinn Féin's commitment to the IRA ceasefire.

40. The introduction of Ministers into the Exploratory Dialogue with the paramilitary-related parties was a very significant achievement. Through the ministerial presence, and our responsiveness to the concerns expressed by the parties (e.g. on prison regimes), we were able to normalize contacts between Ministers and the parties and underscore the importance of progress on decommissioning. Once Michael Ancram's entry had opened the door to Ministerial level contacts with Sinn Féin, other meetings followed outside the XD framework, starting with an informal meeting between Sir Patrick Mayhew, the Secretary of State, and Gerry Adams in the margins of a White House Investment Conference on 24 May.

41. It was true, of course, that the progress achieved in the Dialogue was a development of process rather than a delivery of hardware. But there was a lesson in that. We had set decommissioning as a test for moving forward, but Sinn Féin offered no prospect of movement on destroying arms before the multi-party talks started; while the loyalist groups (despite the urging of their political representatives) would not move until the republicans had gone first. And without a position on arms which was acceptable to them, it seemed most unlikely that the Ulster Unionists would participate (particularly under David Trimble, whom the UUP had elected as its new hardline leader, replacing Molyneaux, who was seen as too passive over the Framework document).

Meanwhile, the PUP and UDP remained chronically concerned that with their limited electoral support they would be cast aside as the process developed.

42. The challenge was therefore to find a fresh perspective on the arms issue which would demonstrate an adequate degree of progress to satisfy the key players (particularly the UUP), without requiring actual decommissioning up front. If such an approach stemmed from a credible independent review, so much the better. The close interest taken in the peace process by President Clinton, encouraged by the SDLP and Irish Government, suggested that a senior US figure might take on this role – and specifically George Mitchell, the former Senate Majority Leader whom Clinton had appointed as his Special Envoy for Northern Ireland and who had made a positive impression at the White House Investment Conference. While Unionists were traditionally suspicious of Irish American influence and by extension any attempt to “internationalize” the Northern Ireland conflict, they were partly reassured by the balancing appointment of two non-Americans: General John de Chastelain, former head of the Canadian Defence Forces, and Harri Holkeri, lately Prime Minister of Finland. These three accordingly constituted the International Body which was established in November 1995 by the British and Irish Governments with a remit to “provide an independent assessment of the decommissioning issue”. This was described as part of a “Twin Track” approach; the other track consisting of intensive preparatory talks with the parties to reach agreement on the logistics – structure, format and agenda - for the all-party Talks.

43. With the launch of the Twin Track approach, complemented by meetings between Ministers and the paramilitary-linked parties, the focus shifted away

from the Exploratory Dialogues, which had effectively run their course by the autumn of 1995. The International Body's Report was published in January 1996, containing the "Mitchell Principles" of democracy and non-violence, which assumed considerable importance as the process moved ahead; a proposal for decommissioning in parallel to all-party Talks rather than before them; and a cautious allusion to an electoral process which might give Unionists a mandate to participate in the Talks. Subsequent events go beyond the scope of this paper, but it is worth recording that as part of the eventual electoral process we did find a way of including the loyalist parties in the all-party Talks, through the creation of an elected Forum from which the ten most electorally successful parties (including the PUP and UDP and some other smaller groups like the Women's Coalition) could nominate delegates to the Talks.

Conclusion

44. Undoubtedly, the two sets of Exploratory Dialogue were a vital milestone in the progress towards a lasting settlement. While they did not achieve everything the Government had hoped - in particular, substantive IRA decommissioning, which only took place some years later - the ground-breaking meetings with officials, followed by the transition to Ministerial level with the entry of Michael Ancram, did normalise direct dealings between the Government and the paramilitary-linked parties, which was an essential prerequisite for progress. Intense work also continued with the other stakeholders, including the Irish Government, and these efforts came to fruition in the establishment of a mechanism – the International Body – which enabled progress to be made both on illegal weapons and on the groundwork for future inclusive talks. And the

Dialogues were the first steps in a more direct and overt relationship with Sinn Fein and the loyalists which helped build the resilience the process needed to survive the ending of the IRA ceasefire (including the Docklands and Manchester bombs in February and June 1996) and ultimately the construction of the Good Friday Agreement.

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October 2026