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IRISH EMBASSY, LONDON

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9 December, 1994

Mr. Sean O hUiginn
Assistant Secretary
Anglo-Irish Division
Department of Foreign Affairs

Dear Assistant Secretary

Meeting with Seamus Mallon, 7 December, 1994

Colin Wrafter and I took Seamus Mallon to lunch on Wednesday following his inability, because of a dinner with the Speaker of the House of Commons, to attend the Press Party on Tuesday night.

We found Seamus in an anxious mood both as regards the peace process and the SDLP's future. Much of our effort went into underlining the SDLP's extraordinary contribution over the years and the respect it continues to command, both in Ireland and in Britain, as an arbiter of fairness regarding the elements of an overall settlement.

Seamus in turn paid particular tribute to "the imagination and moral courage" of those on the Irish Government side who have been involved in negotiating the Framework Document.

Peace process

Seamus drew attention to various factors of uncertainty, including the political situation in the Dail and at Westminster and the possibility of a bad Sinn Fein reaction to the Framework Document. He believes that the UUP, although more at ease with themselves than in the past, are hoping to avoid significant political change. The British Labour Party, since the departure of Kevin McNamara as spokesman, lacks a clear sense of direction. Some of the SDLP's most prominent members are bearing an excessive strain from the personal point of view. Moreover, the complexity of the issues and the caution of the major British political parties means that we are facing perhaps a five-year process if real peace is to be achieved. This increases the possibility that something may go seriously wrong.



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In view of the Newry killing and media reports of restlessness in sections of the IRA, we asked Seamus whether he has any sense of when a particular threat to the peace process may arise or in what circumstances. To this he replied, "There is no obvious deadline". It is more that pressures from various directions make the future course of events unpredictable.

The SDLP

Seamus is very concerned about the success of Sinn Fein in scooping such funds as may be available from the Irish diaspora in America and Australia for political parties in the North. He said that Sinn Fein now employs more than one hundred party workers in Ireland - something with which the SDLP cannot compete.

Seamus referred obliquely to moves within his own party to work out an accommodation with Sinn Fein on candidates for the next Westminster General Election. He was adamant that he would not accept such an accommodation.

We pointed out, and Seamus readily agreed, that the SDLP would do much better than Sinn Fein in an election held in the North today. This brought him, however, to complain of the long-term danger of what he sees as the British Government's excessive focus on Sinn Fein.

British talks with Sinn Fein

Seamus said that he sometimes wonders whether the central reality of the peace process is that the British Government wants the IRA weapons to be handed over and is willing to do a deal to get them. He said that Michael Ancram hinted in the House of Commons on 1 December that the arms question would be the last to be resolved. This gives Sinn Fein enormous influence and may imply that the British Government will ultimately be willing to "improve on" the Downing Street Declaration to please Sinn Fein.

We acknowledged that the British Government appears willing to accept a broad interpretation of the agenda for the exploratory talks and that this may mean that constitutional issues may be addressed in some form between the British and Sinn Fein at an early stage. However, we wondered whether Seamus was reading too much into Ancram's recent statement. Our impression from the text of the statement and from direct contacts with Ancram is that the British are disposed to drive a hard bargain over the relationship between the decommissioning of arms and Sinn Fein's entry into negotiations. Would it not be true to say that there is a danger of a too rigid British position in this area?

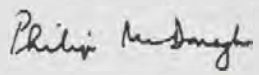
Seamus remained sceptical. He feels that the British Government is deeply attracted to the idea of an accommodation with Sinn Fein and that in practice bilateral contacts between these two actors may come to be regarded in Whitehall as the core of the peace process unless the British Government can be persuaded otherwise. For the SDLP, the danger is a loss of electoral support. For the Irish Government, it is a loss of influence over the peace process and a risk for Irish political parties of being drawn in the wake of Sinn Fein. If these things were to happen, there could be unpredictable consequences in the Unionist community.

We asked Seamus what he sees as the remedy to these potential problems. He said the key point is for the British and Irish Governments jointly to steer the peace process. This means both a more pro-active role from the British Government in a number of areas - including a clearer statement of aims on police reform - and a greater readiness on the part of the British to work closely with Dublin on every aspect of the peace process.

The Forum for Peace and Reconciliation

Seamus believes that the Forum could most usefully be employed addressing the "principles" that will underlie an overall settlement. He was not opposed to discussing a Bill of Rights, although he feels that this is hardly, at root, a controversial issue. His main concern seems to be that there will be a "political crunch" in some months' time, to do with efforts to establish a pan-nationalist front (if we understood him correctly).

Yours sincerely



Philip McDonagh
Counsellor