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Reference Code: 2021/97/14

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AN RÚNAÍOCHT ANGLA-ÉIREANNACH

ANGLO-TRISH SECRETARIAT

BÉALFEIRSTE

BELFAST

14 March, 1995

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20/3/95

Mr Sean O hUiginn
Second Secretary
Anglo-Irish Division
Dept of Foreign Affairs
Dublin 2

*[c.c. Mr. Sec. to
Tommy (on return)]*

Dear Second Secretary

Dinner with Quentin Thomas

Three of the senior officers dealing with political affairs at the NIO joined myself and Sean Farrell for dinner here last evening. The British visitors were Quentin Thomas, Martin Williams and Jonathan Stephens. I had a word with you about the main points of the conversation earlier today. The following may be useful for the record.

British Meeting with Sinn Fein?

No meeting has yet been arranged with Sinn Fein. The British expect to respond shortly to Adams' statement last week. I did not sense that they regarded the statement as satisfactory and Thomas made a point of noting Mitchel McLaughlin's own characterisation of it in an interview on Friday as nothing new. At the same time, he and Williams were not unhopeful that Ministers could be sufficiently assured to allow a meeting involving Ancram to take place soon, next week if all goes well. They repeated more than once, however, that the onus was on Sinn Fein to show that they would talk seriously about decommissioning.

Unionist Reaction to the Framework Document

Thomas was caustic about the Unionist reaction to the document, "too dim to realise they have won whereas the Republicans are too smart to say they have lost". Notwithstanding their desire for talks, they were taking their line from their political leaders, or, more accurately from the authors of the leak in The Times, who had succeeded to that extent. He repeated a view that has become standard on the British side, that the leak had nearly succeeded in scuppering the Document altogether and would have but for the prompt and decisive action of the Prime Minister.

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Thomas was not in any way defensive or self-critical about the Framework Document. He believed firmly that anyone seriously analysing the situation on the basis of the agreed statement of 26 March 1991 would have come up with something similar to it. Nor was he pessimistic. He thought Unionists would come into talks in due course, but it might take longer than previously expected.

Martin Williams was guarded (from other conversation, I think he privately believes Thomas went too far to meet our position). Jonathan Stephens seemed to have been shaken by the Unionist reaction and, perhaps, by his direct experience of Loyalist views at talks with the British side yesterday morning. His comment on that meeting was that the Loyalists "are slipping away".

Note

Thomas felt particularly strongly about the Unionist rejection of the Strand One document, recalling that the document reflected what Unionists themselves had agreed to in 1992. I agreed there was no consistency in the Unionist approach, but did note that since 1992 the peace had come, Sinn Fein had emerged as a player on the scene and Northern Nationalism was politically stronger which had made the Unionists still more defensive. They had not found the carrot of the Assembly appealing enough, apart from the fact that it came with North/South additives. Perhaps direct rule was too comfortable, even with the unwanted presence of the Irish Government. Thomas agreed with the second point, wondering only half ironically how direct rule could be made less comfortable. I thought that if the Unionists refused to cooperate on the basis of the Framework Document or something that met the same requirements, the partnership between the two Governments forged by the Agreement and made stronger since the Brooke initiative in 1990 would develop further both in internal matters and in North/South cooperation. If the two Governments were vigorous enough (as the British were not after the Agreement and with predictable consequences) that in itself should be an incentive to the Unionists to make a deal.

American decision on the Adams visa

Thomas thought "maybe yes, maybe not". This was his cue for strong words about the American decision to lift the restrictions on Adams' visa and invite him to St. Patrick's Day festivities on Capitol Hill and at the White House, and about our part in it. Quite probably there was an element of deliberate exaggeration in his message for effect.

He said the two Governments had stood together on the Declaration and the Framework Document but were now drifting apart which was a real concern. The Americans had given themselves leverage with Sinn Fein and then thrown it away, and we had helped them do it. The Tánaiste's remark in the US that it would be a formula for disaster to insist on disarmament by the IRA and other paramilitaries before moving ahead with peace talks was exactly the wrong thing to say, in the wrong place, at the wrong time. He noted that the phrase had been picked up and relayed in the lead story of An

Phoblacht. I said that the newspaper report had not shown the full context; moreover what the Tanaiste had actually said was that to take the attitude that nothing would happen unless there was a surrender or decommissioning of arms would be a formula for disaster. The British themselves were not saying that this was so although the Unionists were saying this or something close to it.

We gathered that Thomas' main worry was that the crude reporting of the comments, and the punch of the phrase "formula for disaster", had made the Unionists even more difficult to deal with, had made his own side's elastic position more difficult to maintain in the Commons, and had encouraged a disposition in America to make concessions to Adams.

Thomas was critical too of the Taoiseach for appearing to abandon, in Thomas's mind, previous doubts about Sinn Fein and views on the arms issue. He thought that what the Taoiseach had said to the Prime Minister at the Summit in December had not been followed through; the Taoiseach's line now seemed to be quite different, more or less "give them anything they want".

I said that was an absurd characterisation. We both agreed there should be no preconditions for talks. We both wanted progress on the arms issue and it was wrong to suggest that the Irish side were not exerting their influence. Both the Taoiseach and the Tanaiste had spoken out (I drew Williams' attention today to the further remarks of the Taoiseach prior to leaving for the US). We had also been understanding of difficulties faced by the British Government on their own backbenches and of the formulas they had been obliged to us. There probably was not much between our views of Adams' good faith or of what he could realistically achieve at present. Where there was a difference was in our views of the importance or otherwise of strengthening the hand of Adams and his allies. We thought the greater risk was to weaken Adams by denying him access and kudos; the British had sought ceaselessly to do just that. We understood some of their reasons but we did not agree.

The American business was different. First, it was a matter for the Americans to decide, although we believed their decision could be helpful on the conditions we understood existed and on the basis of our own judgement. Second, had not the British made exactly the same point about leverage when President Clinton allowed Adams in well before last year's ceasefire? The President had taken a great deal of flak for most of last year, in fact until the ceasefire actually came. In the end of the day, his decision had proved correct. There was no doubt that he had gone out on a limb again for Sinn Fein; equally, America was so important to that party that we felt they would have a sense of obligation to repay. No doubt when they had mended their fences with the White House, the British would be reminding the President of

precisely this. Lastly, there was an emotional Anglo-American element in all this which had nothing to do with us.

Thomas acknowledged some justice in these remarks. He was somewhat impatient with the atmospherics of the dispute, and even contemptuous of the angst in London about the standing of the special relationship. He did feel strongly, however, that the President should have paid a great deal more attention to Unionist sensitivities. He said targetting, supply and weapons improvements were still going on; decommissioning was an issue on which Adams was going to find it much more difficult to deliver; and without delivery of "substantial progress" Unionists would simply not enter talks.

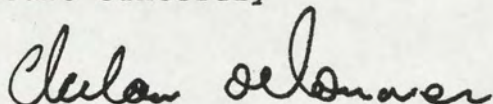
I thought the British concentration on the Unionists was, as usual, excessive. No one was going to sit down to talk to Sinn Fein under threat of a resumption of violence, but we also had to understand the difficulties of building trust on their side. The main point was that the peace had lasted and should be built to last indefinitely.

Returning to the American decision, Thomas said we never discussed with them what we were doing in Washington. We were frank and open about all manner of things but not about that. I said neither side was. The British seemed to assume that they would carry the day in Washington and did not bother to tell us what they were at. It might well be desirable that we should speak more frankly to each other but this worked both ways; even if we disagreed as we often did in other areas, we might succeed in minimising the effects of it and in any event gain more understanding of the political assessments and requirements on either side.

Mayhew visit to Washington

You wondered whether the Secretary of State might have been led to visit Washington because of suggestions by the Embassy there that the Adams decision had gone in their favour, or, alternatively, that he might be able to influence it. We are not the best placed to judge that point, but for what it's worth I have the impression that the Secretary of State intended to visit Washington as a matter of course after the Framework Document was issued and that the only reason he postponed the initial slightly earlier date for the visit was a practical one, namely, that some of the people he wanted to see were out of Washington. That was Thomas's view last evening.

Yours sincerely



Declan O'Donovan
Joint Secretary