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AMBASÁID NA hÉIREANN, LONDAIN



IRISH EMBASSY, LONDON

Mr. Wilkin

25, 25 33/2

S.H. 15.2.95.

17, GROSVENOR PLACE,
SW1X 7HR

Telephone: 0171-235 2171

Fax: 0171-245 6961



Dairseach

Do see please

in particular

marked passages

JH 9/2/95

PST

PSS

Mr F Murray

Mr P Deacon

Mr S. Donlan

Mr T Dalton

J Sec

*JH
8/2*

8 February 1995

Mr Sean O hUiginn
Second Secretary
Anglo-Irish Division
HQ

Dear Secretary

Meeting with Seamus Mallon MP

Seamus Mallon invited Colin Wrafter and me to see him last night following the SDLP's meeting with the Prime Minister. This letter is a fuller version of points I have already transmitted to the Department by phone.

Format of the SDLP's meeting

The meeting, which was requested by John Hume, took place at the House of Commons. Present on the SDLP side were Hume, Mallon, McGrady and Hendron. On the British side were the Prime Minister, Michael Ancram, the Prime Minister's PPS John Ward MP, Rod Lyne, and John Chilcot. A circle of armchairs was formed and tea was served. The meeting lasted about an hour.

SDLP electoral calculations

The Prime Minister initiated a discussion on how Sinn Fein's involvement in the peace process will affect the SDLP's future as a political party.

The SDLP side argued that PR in Westminster elections would help moderates of all hues.

The Prime Minister underlined that he could not make promises in this area but also seemed to indicate that a change in the electoral system in the North could only be contemplated as part of a package.

Seamus feels that the mind of the British Government is not completely closed to the possibility of aligning the electoral system for Westminster elections more closely to that used for Europe and for a future Assembly.

Decommissioning of arms

For the British side this was the main issue at the meeting.

The Prime Minister said that he is engaged in good faith in the process flowing from the Downing Street Declaration and that "the Brits" (an expression which Major used three times) have no interest in pulling back. The Prime Minister pleaded with the SDLP to use its good offices to obtain some gesture from Sinn Fein on arms. Without a gesture it would be hard to reconcile the Conservative Party as a whole to the next steps the British Government wants to take.

This point was teased out by Ancram and Chilcot. Seamus formed the view that Ancram is anxious to get into talks with Sinn Fein. Chilcot's role was to describe the conditions under which this could happen. Chilcot's wording was "obtuse" but implied that what the British side is looking for is not so much the discovery of a cache of weapons as "forms of words" regarding the future course of negotiations.

[Comment: contacts at the FCO and NIO are more than usually reticent about the state of play in the exploratory dialogue. It seems that Ancram is ready to meet Sinn Fein before their Ard Fheis but only if a price is paid - in terms of their accepting a set of "modalities" for the decommissioning of arms or at least taking a step in that direction. It has been put to me that at this stage one side or other must "take a leap of faith" to move things forward.]

The Framework Document

The Prime Minister said that the Framework Document is "not agreed". Seamus felt that this was a statement of the formal position. [Comment: a Foreign Office contact suggests that the Cabinet will be assessing the peace process tomorrow Thursday 9 February.]

X ~~||~~ The British side offered to brief the SDLP "within a week" on the contents of the Framework Document and the British Strand One paper. The briefing will be conducted by Michael Ancram and will be one of a series of meetings with Northern parties. No date has been set. ~~||~~ X

Future perspectives

Questioned as to the follow-up to publication, the Prime Minister said that the goal is "backsides on seats". Seamus feels that this was meant to include Sinn Fein.

In the course of a free-ranging discussion last night, Seamus identified what he personally sees as the key problem for future negotiations: the determination of the UUP to avoid getting into round-table talks before the next Westminster General Election.

This factor may mean that bilateral consultations will for a period become the focus of the peace process. But the two Governments, and John Major in particular, will have a responsibility to maintain the momentum. Seamus believes that Major is aware of this and will have an interest, in terms of his own political agenda, in achieving fairly rapid progress.

Policing

Seamus seemed reasonably content with his recent meeting with the Chief Constable. Annesley joked that because this is his last job in the police, he will be able to take risks. Although Annesley came across as "stubborn", Seamus suggested that it is a stubbornness which in future may be deployed for positive ends.

Seamus appears confident that the British Government will be ready to reduce the size of the RUC very significantly and to bring in large numbers of Catholics. He sees no need to rush this process. It could be destabilising to make large numbers of police officers redundant overnight. Seamus also referred to the risks run by individuals over so many years in the service of the police.

Seamus seemed sanguine that the name of the force will be changed and that other symbolic steps will be taken.

His main concern is that the regionalisation of policing will be opposed by important interests. Seamus believes that regionalisation is the best way of making the police force acceptable in certain nationalist areas. He emphasised the difference where policing is concerned between "Catholic" and "Nationalist".

Prevention of Terrorism Act

Seamus is insistent that the British Labour Party should oppose the renewal of the PTA. He hinted that under certain circumstances the SDLP would be ready to call for a vote. For technical reasons, this would require all four SDLP MPs to be present at Westminster.

SDLP\Sinn Fein relations

Seamus noted that in two new constituencies, Mid-Ulster and West Tyrone, there will be strong pressure on the SDLP and

Sinn Fein to come to an arrangement, unless somehow or other the electoral system can be changed.

Seamus made no secret of his own determination to preserve the separate identity of the SDLP. He believes the SDLP is capable of a wider range of responses to other political actors than Sinn Fein will be: one should not be dismissive of the school of thought that a portion of the electorate is neither classically Nationalist nor classically Unionist. It was hard to preserve the SDLP during the hunger strikes. A political tradition developed through the efforts of so many people - which is how one could describe the SDLP - is a resource for the future.

In making these points, Seamus emphasised that in his view Sinn Fein is now incapable of going back to violence. He added that Sinn Fein employs 147 people in Ireland and is already starting to collect major sums in the United States and Australia.

The Grand National

The last half hour of our discussion was devoted to a study of the weights for the Grand National, which were published yesterday and were available in the restaurant thanks to a copy of the Sun. We concluded that the best ante-post value is represented by Chatam (40/1).

This is the Pits!

Yours sincerely

Philip McDonagh

Philip McDonagh
Counsellor