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Telephone Conversation between the Taoiseach,
and the British Prime Minister
6 November, 1996.

T Hello John

PM Good afternoon John

T I am just ringing because I believe we are coming close to decision points in regard to the discussions that have been going on through John Hume with Sinn Féin and the possibility - and I think the likelihood in fact of an IRA ceasefire. My understanding is that the package that we have been putting forward or rather that has been put forward with our support is one that will involve Sinn Féin entering the talks just to accept the Mitchell Principles initially. There being a period then after that where there will be a settling down period and an opportunity to verify that the commitment to Mitchell that had been given was real not cosmetic. I understand also that in order to make it possible for them to get that far to get in to accept Mitchell that the declaration of a ceasefire itself would be much much stronger than anything we have seen before and would in fact include words to the effect that the present leadership can't foresee any circumstances in

which the conflict would be resumed or that they would resume the conflict. That in an IRA statement I think would be a very strong statement indeed and I think it goes a long way to meet - in fact it does meet paragraph 8 of the statement in the ground rules, paragraph 8 and 9 - paragraph 9 being the one that actually refers to the ceasefire - paragraph 8 which lays down the principles. I think that would meet the principles set out in paragraph 8. I think that it's very important that we take this opportunity now - the reality is that if all we are being asked to do is essentially restate our existing policies - we're getting in return for that a ceasefire that's far more explicit and durable than — anything that we have seen before and we are avoiding I believe, a fairly dangerous spiral of violence that will probably involve or encompass loyalist violence as well. There will in fact be a time interval of some kind before substantive negotiations really begin, because in the scenario we are putting forward, they would come into the plenary talks just to accept Mitchell and then after that it would be into bilaterals and multilaterals - but the idea that they would have to wait even to accept Mitchell over a quarantine period is as I said to you before something that will just ensure we have no ceasefire, and perhaps will never have a ceasefire, because I think it's a new twist if you like on what we agreed departs basically from what was on the table before, and after Canary Wharf on 8 February, though we would be seen, I think if we were to look for a pre-Mitchell acceptance time period, we would be seen as changing in the terms of our agreed Communiqué which I don't think we should do and I don't think we

need to do, because I think the strength of the statement that you have been able to get John Hume to get them to accept is such that we have achieved our objectives basically.

PM Well John, they haven't accepted that statement, I mean apart from anything else we do have a difference between us on this. I know that Paddy and Dick spent some time going over it and it is a problem over here that I don't immediately see as easily resolvable. We have tried to make some changes to the text to respond to your original concerns - your officials original concerns and in particular we moved away from the explicit three month period which required me to have another meeting of half the Cabinet in order to get any agreement to do that. But the political reality here is that the immediate entry of Sinn Féin into the talks would not be seen as credible and would not run here at all. And even if we were persuadable and we would be very difficult to persuade depending of course upon what they say, and I'll come back to that, but even if we were persuadable our judgement is that I do not know to whom Sinn Féin would be talking because I do not believe that the unionists would be there if they came in straight away in any event. Let us turn for a moment to what they would say when I discussed it with John Hume, he talked about the possibility of making the declaration much stronger and I suggested off the top of my head a form of words which I think you have probably seen.

T Yes a very good form of words.

PM Yes I thought it was ok. and John also thought that they would probably say something positive about accepting parallel decommissioning. He thought also that was a good idea. I don't know whether that has got through to you as well. He _____

T He said that - I don't know what hope we have that they would come back about on that. (Parallel decommissioning)

PM Well we have had no indication at all that they are going to say anything remotely like that, indeed, such intelligence as we got — rather tends to point in the opposite direction.

T I never believed that they would, in fact John mentioned that to somebody and I didn't think that it was likely to happen at this point anyway.

PM I am open to talking to my colleagues again if Sinn Féin come back to us and say "well we're going to say x, y and z to show you in some concrete terms that this is ^{an}equivocal". But the fact of the matter is based on the history of the last few years, them just saying to us that it is ^{an}equivocal won't run here, the House of Commons won't accept that and I don't think I could accept that and we would need something of a good deal stronger than that. I am not closing the door on anything.

T Well I think that the words you suggested

PM Well they haven't yet come back and said, they're asking to see what we would say, well I think I need to see what they're going to say. I need some assurance that they're going to say that. I am not going to proceed without that and even if we got that I am not at all sure that my colleagues will accept it. But if the IRA and Sinn Féin are prepared to use words which suggest permanence that would be a very positive move forward - I agree with that and also if they use positive words on parallel decommissioning that I talked to John about and also the consent principle, all those three things, John and I talked and John felt that Gerry Adams might be able to deliver all three of those, he didn't promise he could because he wasn't in a position to do that.

T Good

PM He agreed with them and he thought he might get them out of Adams. But unless they were really dramatic those words in very clear cut terms so that the situation changed, I simply do not know who on this side of the water would be prepared immediately to accept them at their face value. We have been pretty scarred by what we now know from intelligence they were doing, they were doing all time they were doing the ceasefire and I think you've made the point yourself publicly and certainly in our discussions but publicly that they would need to demonstrate the credible nature of any ceasefire.

T I have, I mean I've quoted -

PM Sorry I don't mean

T I've stuck very carefully to the wording of the ground rules paper and as you know I have been open to a certain amount of misrepresentation because I have been keeping very much to the text as you and I agreed and

PM _____ not sure about

T—

PM Yes we both are. What I am not sure about is why you are convinced the position has changed, because the evidence that we get suggests it to be frankly quite the contrary. It suggests that if anything what Sinn Fein are engaged in is a black widow quadrille to try and convince people that they are going to make movement without in practice doing so and if others are then convinced, seeking to shoulder the blame on to others for the lack of progress. Well if you have any concrete evidence I would be very pleased. I am not sure why you are convinced that it has changed. We certainly aren't. But if Sinn Féin and the IRA can provide us with some real evidence that we could accept that the war is over for good, then of course that changes the situation. But at the moment we don't see anything remotely like that and what I am concerned about this has now gone on for sometime

with John going backwards and forwards and pretty soon its going to break cover, there was a story in the Sunday Tribune in Dublin a week or so ago which was last Sunday which wasn't entirely accurate but it was pretty accurate and if we can't make any progress I am not going to be accused of doing back-stairs deals. I would prefer to show John Hume what it is we propose to do to avoid misunderstandings and accusations about faith and then publish it.

T Well now, could I just take the points you made in sequence. First of all you say that the political reality is that the immediate entry of Sinn Féin to talks won't run with you or won't run on your side of the water so to speak and that the judgement is that the unionists won't be there.

PM I'm not just blaming the unionists

T I know, I accept that fully, you're making two separate points and I acknowledged in our last conversation that I've - sorry, I think I was talking to Paddy - but I have said that I marvel at times at the patience of the British public in the face of some of the activities of the IRA in England, and I repeat that. I think that the first thing I should say is our formula doesn't involve Sinn Féin other than in the most formal sense entering into negotiations immediately. What it involves is them coming into the plenary to accept Mitchell - to accept something that is very hard for them to accept and very exacting and that then, that done, there will be a period of

discussions that wouldn't involve negotiations in a plenary setting, but would involve a more bilateral or dispersed form of discussion.

Now I think that it is possible for Sinn Féin to say that, once they have been let in to accept Mitchell, that they have been accepted into the negotiating process and they are being treated on a par with everybody else, which is important from their point of view. Its psychologically very important to them that they should have this parity.

- But it is also possible for you to say, in turn that the Mitchell principle acceptance is going to be looked at in a very searching, way during the period of the bilaterals or dispersed discussions, and thereby for you to be able to suggest to people that you are concerned about that this isn't bringing them in in a way that involves treating them as if nothing had happened previously.

The next point you made was that the unionists won't be there. In a sense, the declaration of acceptance of the Mitchell Principles is something that needs to be accepted, not by the other participants of the talks in the first instance, but by the two Governments. My understanding is that in the case of problem with the loyalists, whether they had breached Mitchell or not, it was something for the Governments to say well this is acceptable or this is not acceptable. So I don't think that the fact that the unionists might not actually be in the room for that particular

formal swearing of allegiance to the Mitchell Principles session is necessarily fatal to anything of long term value.

The next point you mention is parallel decommissioning - I don't think that John Hume is going to obtain from them. I didn't think he would when I heard him suggest it. But if he does I will be happily surprised. On the other hand, I would agree that he should make progress with them on the consent principle, and I would be happy to see Sinn Féin pressed very hard on the consent principle because I think, in one sense, that's the most important issue of all because it is the absence of their acceptance of the principle of consent, is the motor for their use of the violence I think they should be pressed harder on that, as hard as we can on that within the timeframe - subject to time limits that we have in terms of things not unravelling.

Now on the final point you make really is to do with real evidence as to whether this is or is not for real. I can't say that I know the answer to that question. I believe that Sinn Féin are like a lot of political organisations, who basically pursue one strategy, but have an alternative strategy in their back pocket at all times. I think they are pursuing a strategy of getting into negotiations at the moment, but they are not going to give up their alternative until they are satisfied that the strategy they are following is going to get them somewhere. I think that at a psychological or political level you or I as politicians would never want to be in a situation ourselves where we were just pursuing one option and we had no

way of getting out of that. From our standpoint the second option that they are retaining is one that is completely unacceptable, but from their perspective they see it as simply a case of going back to their original course.

What we are now looking for is the opportunity to get them to abandon that original course once and for all, and I think we have got to be willing to take some risk, or make some leap of credence, to get them to come on board the process. I think it will be much harder for them to go back to violence if they come on board a ceasefire this time. I think that people are much less — willing to give them the benefit of the doubt this time. I think the fact that they would be prepared to go much further, or would appear to be prepared to go much more further on the language this time represents recognition by them that they now face a very substantially changed climate of opinion - a much more cynical climate of opinion about them, and that being so, I don't think they can go back very easily.

PM Well John, I mean the underlying assumption in what you say is that they are going to make a much stronger declaration.

T Yes.

PM I hope that is true. I don't yet believe it is true. I have got no evidence that it is true. If it is true I can look again at our position

and see whether it becomes politically credible. It isn't politically credible at the moment.

T I understand.

PM I would not be able to present it and even if I tried I would not be able to convince anyone. We stuck our neck out a long way here dealing with people whom traditionally for 25 years we _____ in any and their return to violence has fractured the element of trust and good faith that we had extended and I am not going to be put in that position again.

If they are able to say to you "yes we are going to make a much stronger declaration", and they tell you what they will say, then I will discuss with colleagues whether we can shift our position. But short of that I am not going to put anything up front to have it snatched away yet again. In terms of the British position, in terms of the way people are feeling over here I have no difficulty whatever in standing pat because nobody believes a word Sinn Féin/IRA say.

Now, I think the game is more important than that so I am certainly prepared to take risks if I think there is a credible reason of them coming through but I have just been reading a stack of reports suggesting to me that there is nothing serious in this at all from their point of view and that that is not the game they are playing. If they can provide me with some credible evidence that it is the

game they're playing and they can tell me categorically what they are going to say, then I am prepared to discuss again with colleagues, but that will need to be quite quick because, if it isn't, I am going to have the old problem in Northern Ireland is now knowing these discussions are going on and it will be sought before long that I am actually into a position of negotiating with Sinn Féin and then we will be in all sorts of chaos, so if they can come back pretty soon and tell us that this extra language is there, is going to be confirmed, that we can rely upon it, and then I think we can begin to look and see if we can find a way through it but short of that, with the best will in the world, I simply can't.

T I understand that position on the assumption that there is no advance on the language that is used. My belief is that there can be an advance on the language, and while I can't undertake on behalf of the Irish Government that we will secure any particular language, let me tell you that we will use our best offices to get others who can persuade them to use the stronger language that you need and I

PM But I can't offer a guarantee that on the stronger language as to how my Cabinet will respond.

T I understand that too. We do not live in fantasy world, and I completely understand that, but I also am convinced that you are acting in the best of good faith to solve this problem.

PM Well I promise you that I am.

T I know that, and that's why I think we will solve it, but it's going to require a bit more work.

PM Well I can hold off publishing this for a day or so, but not for very much longer I don't think without John Hume.....well I suppose I explained to John that the unionists and others, who know this is going on, are also asking daily what is going on, when can we see the document, what on earth are you up to.

T Yes. Well look we'll need to get onto the business of getting them to sign up to the language in the strongest possible form and as I understand it, there are three elements in the language that are important. One is that the present leadership can't foresee circumstances in which the IRA would resume conflict, the other is around the issue of consent, and the third is around the question of what they might say about parallel decommissioning.

PM Those were the three points I put to John Hume.

T Yes. Now I will certainly see what we can do on those points. I don't myself think that there is any prospect of anything very much on parallel decommissioning, but we will try. I am in favour of parallel decommissioning, as you know, its not a question of not being in favour of it, it's a question of what we can get them to say at this particular point.

PM Yes.

T Could I just, I have a logistical problem insofar as I will be out of Dublin from now on until late tonight.

PM I'm going to be in France.

T Oh good, I'd far prefer to be there than where I am going to be!

PM Yes.

T I'm going to Cork!

PM Ok John but I mean

T Tomorrow morning, perhaps we could talk.

PM It may be possible, yes.

T Well John, we'll keep in touch with John Holmes and see what the availability is.

PM Okay.