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4 SEPTEMBER 1997

TO HQ
FOR SECRETARY GALLAGHER

FROM WASHINGTON
FROM P HENNESSY

SINN FÉIN IN WASHINGTON

1. The Sinn Féin delegation left Washington this afternoon (for New York) after what must be regarded as a successful visit. Buoyed by the cease-fire and their imminent entry to the talks process, the party leadership gave a confident, measured presentation which played well throughout their visit. Appointments at the White House, on Capitol Hill, and with the media effectively covered all the bases, even if growing familiarity meant there was less hype than on previous visits. In fact this may have suited the delegation, helping to neatly counter-point the party's emphasis on progress through negotiations, and Sinn Féin's rightful place at the heart of the process.

White House

2. Larry Butler of the National Security Council characterized the meeting at the White House as a "torch-passing session"– an opportunity for the Sinn Féin leadership to meet the new NSC team viz National Security Adviser Sandy Berger, his deputy Jim Steinberg, and Butler himself (who, of course, until last month was DCM at the US Embassy in Dublin). The Sinn Féin team comprised Gerry Adams, Martin McGuinness, Caoimghin O Caolain and Mairéad Keane.

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3. Having summarized the situation in familiar terms, and emphasized his deep appreciation for the role played by the President, Adams urged that this be maintained by the new national security team. Berger responded that the President had been profoundly affected by his visit to Ireland and remained passionately committed to the search for peace. This was the backdrop against which he and his colleagues were working: it could be taken that there would be no change in the level of commitment.

4. Welcoming the cease-fire Berger noted that it had been judged to be genuine, and that it would last (Butler commented that this latter point combined optimism with a marker as to what was expected). He commented, lightly, on the obvious and serious consequences for Sinn Féin/US contacts if this were not the case.

5. There was some discussion of the situation within the Unionist camp, and how Trimble might be helped to remain at the talks. Referring to views in the business and wider Unionist community, Adams thought that Trimble would turn up, but that in any event the talks must proceed with or without him. (Butler mentioned the on-going contacts between ourselves and the British Government in this area, and said they hoped that an agreed approach could be found).

6. Stressing the importance of confidence-building measures, Adams pointed to the value of a helpful US attitude on visas and fund-raising. The response was there would not be a problem so long as the cease-fire is in place.

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Comments by Peter King

7. In the light of this morning's New York Times account of the meeting (which suggested a somewhat finger-wagging attitude on Berger's part) I asked Peter King, who has been close to Adams throughout the trip, and hosted a private dinner with some journalists immediately after the White House meeting, how he thought it had gone. He said the Sinn Féin side had given him a very upbeat account of the meeting, and they clearly felt it had gone well. (As Adrian O'Neill has reported, Jim Steinberg has today given a further briefing to the Irish correspondents which strikes a distinctly warmer note than the NYT piece).

Capitol Hill

8. The program on Capitol Hill included two well-attended meetings on the House side - one organized by King, at which the press were present, and a session with the House International Relations Committee chaired by Ben Gilman. A major talking point was the participation of the Speaker, and his strong endorsement of Congressional support for the process. Stressing the significance of his participation, King said that both at the meeting and later in conversation on the floor of the House, Gingrich had emphasized to him his interest in strengthening US support for the process, including by putting together a joint congressional and business delegation to visit Ireland. King will be following this up with colleagues, including Mark Foley(R-Florida)who was mentioned by Gingrich in this regard, and was a recent visitor to Ireland.

9. The Speaker also invited Gerry Adams to attend next year's St Patrick's Day lunch on Capitol Hill (this contrasts with Gingrich's initial reluctance in hosting the Sinn Fein leader during the first cease-fire).

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10. The only challenging moment for Adams came when the respected senior member Lee Hamilton, the ranking Democrat on the International Relations Committee, referred to Adams' Press Club comments on "comprise", and asked if this meant that he would settle for less than a united Ireland. Adams replied that their objective was clear and that it did not make sense to lower expectations before talks began. However his comments generally were taken as indicating an acknkowledgement that progress could only be made through dialogue, with the give-and-take which this implied (he was quite explicit on this point on a number of other occasions). Adams also indicated to Hamilton that, if the talks were making progress, the May 1998 deadline might be extended.

11. In response to the question what more could Congress do, Adams urged that they keep up the pressure for progress. He added the suggestion that two monitors might be appointed to follow the progress of the negotiations, but the idea does not appear to have been picked up. Not surprisingly, Gilman and others used the meeting to secure endorsement of their stance on McBride and related issues.

Senators Kennedy and Dodd

12. At their meeting with the two Senators the Sinn Fein leadership referred to the good working relationship with the present Irish Government. Our contacts mentioned two other points of interest in what were somewhat franker exchanges:

- in response to a question from Dodd on the proximity talks format, McGuinness immediately branded them as "ridiculous" Without disagreeing with his colleague, Adams suggested that if something like Dayton was involved (time-limited/intense diplomatic effort etc) then perhaps it might be considered. He

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suggested however that Unionists saw it merely as a stalling tactic. Both felt certain that Trimble, whom they generally talked-up on this trip as well-meaning but beset by party rivals, would be in the building if not in the room when the talks begin.

- citing the importance of confidence-building measures, Deputy O Caolain referred to delays in our jurdistiction in completing arrangements for the transfer from the US of Peter Eamon Maguire.

Comment

13. That Sinn Fein did well on the Hill is clear. However, one long-standing observer, close to the Sinn Fein position, added that they should also take away from Congress the sense that Sinn Fein too have been given a great opportunity, which the US has helped to create, and that their American friends will expect to see it fully exploited.

14. Finally, many on the Hill commented on the high quality of the Sinn Fein delegation, which apart from Adams was not well known here. While Martin McGuinness was particularly mentioned, note was also taken of the contribution made by Caoimghin O Caolain and the team's economic adviser, Councillor Sean Mc Knight from Belfast.

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