

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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16 January, 1997.

cc PST
PSS
Mr Teahon
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Mr. Seán O hUiginn,
Second Secretary,
Anglo-Irish Division,
Department of Foreign Affairs,
St. Stephen's Green,
DUBLIN 2.

Dear Secretary,

Conversations with David Trimble and Sir Patrick Mayhew

I met David Trimble at a New Year's Reception in the American Embassy last night. He was keen to talk about developments in Northern Ireland and the current state of the peace process. Trimble, although trenchant in his criticism of the Irish position, was civil to me personally; later when we were joined by Quentin Thomas his mood changed somewhat and he became more argumentative. Nonetheless Thomas said to me afterwards that it was one of the more reasonable encounters he has had with the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party. The main points are outlined below. I would draw your attention in particular to what Trimble said on decommissioning which is covered in the fourth paragraph below and in the "Comment" section.

Prospects of an IRA Ceasefire Trimble said that up to recently he was working on the assumption that the IRA would declare a tactical ceasefire in advance of the British General Election to maximise Sinn Féin's electoral advantage both in terms of the party's overall profile in Northern Ireland and in the interest of a pact with the SDLP. He had good reason to believe that the debate within the Republican Movement had been moving in that direction.

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However since the publication of John Hume's article in the Sunday Independent and the clarification of the SDLP's conditions for an electoral arrangement he now no longer believes in this scenario. Hume's position, which Trimble alleged had been forced on a reluctant Hume by others in the SDLP, had caused a rethink of tactics in the IRA which had come to the conclusion that a renewed ceasefire before the British election would not serve their tactical or strategic interests. He therefore believes that the IRA will intensify their terrorist activities in Northern Ireland and that it is a matter of time before a policeman or civilian is killed. In these circumstances he does not believe that the Loyalist ceasefire can hold (he categorised recent Loyalist activities as unauthorised actions by the UFF) and that the Loyalist reaction will be vicious and sectarian and far in excess of anything we have seen before.

British Government Trimble blamed the British Government for the deterioration in the security situation singling out Mayhew and Ancram for particular criticism. Their weak security response to the resumption of IRA activities encouraged the terrorists to believe that they were dealing with a weak Government that was susceptible to terrorist pressure. He believed that there was a need for a much more robust security reply, but would not be drawn on what that might be. Echoing comments made to me by Jon Snow last week he said that Mayhew had switched off and was no longer really interested or engaged. Later, when he put this point to Quentin Thomas, Thomas defended his boss saying that he had seen no evidence of disengagement and that Mayhew was working as hard as ever. Trimble rounded on Thomas saying that the attitude of NIO officials was at the root of the problem.

Belfast Talks Trimble was pessimistic about the prospects for progress in the talks while they continued on their current basis. As he saw it, for so long as the Irish Government allowed its policy to be dictated by an overwhelming desire to bring Sinn Féin in and subordinated everything to that requirement there could be no progress. While we maintained the view that the talks without Sinn Féin were "not worth a penny candle" our position would be hostage to Sinn Féin and the IRA. I said that his description of our position was a distortion and far too simple. It was true that we wished to see an inclusive process. That was an essential part of the current project and one that we felt was still worth working for. But we had never precluded progress in the absence of Sinn Féin. We wanted to see the decommissioning issue resolved in a way that allowed the talks to move on to the substantive agenda and the three

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strands. But it was the Unionist position on decommissioning that was blocking progress. If Trimble was saying that we should now abandon all hope of an inclusive process then that would require a fundamental rethink of the whole basis on which the process had been established. For our part we believed that morally, intellectually and politically the current approach was valid and that for all its difficulties should be maintained. Trimble said that the point may come when we would need a fundamental review, but he shied away from saying that that point had ben arrived at. In response to my direct question he said that he wished to see the current process maintained.

Decommissioning Trimble said that the UUP position of last October on decommissioning was based firmly on the Mitchell Report. The Irish Government on the other hand wished to get around Mitchell by weasily interpretations of the wording in the Report focussed on the phrase "the parties should consider an approach". Our position had created widespread mistrust on the Unionist side and because of it he did not believe that we were genuinely committed to working for an actual arms handover during the course of negotiations. Again, as he saw it, we took our cue from Sinn Féin. I argued this point with him emphasising that we did genuinely wish to see a process of decommissioning during the negotiations. The problem was that we all needed to design a method that would ensure that those with the weapons would be prepared to cooperate. This applied as much to the Loyalist paramilitaries as to Sinn Féin. We were not taking our cue from Sinn Féin but pointing to the reality of the situation if real progress was to be made on the arms issue. What was clear to me was that there would never be agreement on the basis of the UUP's demands for actual decommissioning before Sinn Féin's entry into substantive talks and agreement to a subsequent schedule. Mitchell had ruled out prior decommissioning and was quite clear about this when he spoke about some decommissioning "during" the negotiations. At this point Trimble seemed to back away from the precise detail of his October demand and said that what he wanted was a commitment from the Governments, including the Irish Government, to a method that would provide for actual decommissioning during the talks. He needed that "insurance" before he could move any further.

The discussion was joined at this point by Quentin Thomas, and because of what appeared to be a softening in Trimble's line I went back over some of the ground for Thomas's benefit and to check that my understanding of Trimble's position was accurate. Trimble accused Thomas of trying to browbeat the UUP at Tuesday's bilateral in Belfast by threatening "20" years of negotiations on

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the basis of the UUP position. Thomas said that in his view a deal on decommissioning on the basis of the UUP's paper of October was not on. This was what he was trying to get across to the UUP delegation. Trimble then reverted to the line that he had taken with me - that he needed "insurance" and that what he wanted was assurances that the Governments took seriously the requirement to decommission during the negotiations. He alleged that this had been his position all along and that it was clear from his October paper. Thomas said that he had not heard the Unionist position set out in such terms to which Trimble replied "you have not been listening to what I have been saying". (See comment below).

Substantive Talks Earlier I had asked Trimble about his view of the possibility of movement on substantive issues if the decommissioning issue could be resolved. He admitted that the position of the parties to the talks would be constrained by the prospect of the British General election but emphasised that in his view this applied as much to the SDLP as to the UUP. To cover himself he said, with a laugh, that the prospects of movement after the election were not that bright either.

Sir Patrick Mayhew

I had an opportunity to speak briefly to Mayhew who, in a glum mood and reflecting on his period as Secretary of State, said that he "saw failure all around him". He saw little possibility of progress and was preoccupied with the resumption of IRA activities in Northern Ireland which, he said, "was deadly and for real". He echoed Trimble's fears about the likelihood of civilian and police casualties and supposed that the IRA would get him (Sir Patrick) if they could. On Trimble's position on decommissioning (on which he had already been briefed by Thomas) he said it was interesting but that Trimble was volatile and unreliable.

Ambassador Crowe's Position

The American Ambassador, Bill Crowe, has just returned from Washington where I understand the President asked him to remain in London until after the British General Election. The intention I believe is to leave him here until the Summer and to replace him in the Autumn.

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Séamus Mallon

Séamus Mallon called round to the Embassy yesterday afternoon and we spoke for about an hour and a half. Philip McDonagh will do a report. Mallon was in a downbeat mood. The main point of his argument was that the political parties could not be expected to shoulder the burden of saving or sustaining the Belfast talks and that the time had come for the two Governments to take a more directed and hands on approach. He did not however have any recipe for success.

A British General Election

There is increasing speculation here that Major may go for an election somewhat sooner, but not much sooner, than 1 May - perhaps in mid-April. According to David Wastell, Political Editor of the Sunday Telegraph, who came to lunch at the Embassy yesterday, journalists who travelled with the Prime Minister to India, and who spent some considerable time with him, found Major to be in an extraordinarily cheerful and confident mood. He continues to talk of 1 May as his preferred date but many suspect that this is to give him more room for manoeuvre.

Comment

Trimble clearly wanted to talk about his ideas. He approached me during the reception, while I was engaged in conversation with someone else, to wish me a happy New Year and to take me aside. In general he was in an affable and forthcoming mood but emphatic about his position.

Thomas said to me afterwards that he thought that Trimble was deliberate in what he said about decommissioning and intended to signal that he was prepared to soften his line, although he (Thomas) would be the first to admit from experience that what Trimble said inside or outside the negotiations was not bankable. He felt that the UUP had a real difficulty with our position and interpreted our reliance on Mitchell's phrase "to consider" as a way out of a genuine commitment to work towards actual decommissioning. He himself thought our position on the Mitchell phraseology had reached its sell-by date and he wondered whether we would be prepared to work towards a refinement of our position in the light of this and of changes on the ground in Northern

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Ireland. For his own part he would advise Ministers that Trimble's apparent softening of position was worth exploring and that the two Governments should examine ways of demonstrating that they took seriously the idea of parallel decommissioning. One idea which he would try to work up was the imposition of sanctions in the event of a party (presumably a paramilitary group associated with a party) not adhering to commitments to parallel decommissioning. A willingness to contemplate such sanctions would be one way in which the Governments could demonstrate the seriousness with which they take the Mitchell proposal. I expect that you may hear more of this when the British team, which includes Thomas, visits Dublin today and tomorrow.

Yours sincerely,

Ted Barrington
Ambassador

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