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SECURE FAX

To: Mr. Paddy Teahon
Dept. of an Taoiseach

From: Second Secretary O hUiginn
Department of Foreign Affairs

Date: 29 May 1997

Pages: 7 (including cover)

Anglo-Irish Division report

-- *Contact from Ms. Rita O'Hare*

Belfast Report

-- *British Government meeting with Sinn Féin*

SECRET

**Contact from Ms. Rita O'Hare on British meeting
with Sinn Féin on 28 May 1997**

1. In the absence of Mr. Teahon, Ms. O'Hare, who was about to depart for South Africa, contacted me to brief me last night on the most recent Sinn Féin meeting with British officials.
2. Ms. O'Hare characterised the meeting as disappointing, or at best "mixed". The previous meeting had been positive, and all about the desire on both sides to move forward. The British had accepted that the four points raised by Sinn Féin were real issues and surmountable.
3. Ms. O'Hare said the Sinn Féin delegation had approached the present meeting expecting clarity and they had got none.
4. On the question of Sinn Féin entry, there was a vague mention of the possibility of adjournment, and bilaterals and trilaterals filling the vacuum. There was however nothing definite from the British and it was all "perhaps".
5. On decommissioning, they were told the issue would be decided in the negotiating process on the basis of sufficient consensus, and that officials from the two Governments were working on the issue. There was however no further degree of clarity, and the Sinn Féin delegation had the clear impression that the issue was being left at Mr. Trimble's disposition. She repeated there was no way that Sinn Féin could sell a mere "decommissioning conference". British officials had hinted they might have more to say on this

issue at a further meeting, but that was the nearest it had come to any sort of positive engagement.

6. On confidence issues, the British officials had merely quoted the Queen's speech and the Labour Party manifesto, but again had not moved to any specifics beyond that.
7. On the time-frame, the British side had repeated the notion that May '98 was a natural cut-off, and had spoken about two-monthly reviews, a new element which Sinn Féin had viewed with suspicion.
8. Overall the Sinn Féin delegation saw something of a conflict between the British saying that they wanted to move to an inclusive process, and the absence of any "substantive goods" on offer in the actual meeting. In short they had found a contrast between positive rhetoric and an absence of substance. Above all, the meeting failed to produce the clarity which Sinn Féin needed to sell matters to their side.
9. I told Ms. O'Hare that the disappointment on the Sinn Féin side had been more than matched by the reaction on the British side. I said we found the outcome most perplexing. If Sinn Féin were sincere about wanting a ceasefire before the Summer break, then to waste in this way one of the few crucial meetings available for that purpose seemed very irresponsible. If they did not want a ceasefire in that time-frame, and were instead playing tactical games, it would be more sensible to make that clear, and not to have meetings, since at this crucial juncture a bad meeting, in my view, was worse than no meeting at all. Progress would require reciprocal movement, and we understood Sinn Féin had merely danced around their "square one" positions on all points.

10. I said that as a simple matter of political reality, even on the best scenario the British would need some weeks between an announcement of the restoration of the ceasefire and Sinn Féin admission to Talks. Counting back from the likely break in the Talks for Summer, that left little or no time in June. At a time when there was widespread scepticism about Sinn Féin's real intentions, it seemed to me foolish to give the negative signal they had given at the last meeting, and that moreover, on the eve of President Clinton's visit to London. I stressed very strongly the pressures that there would be to move on without Sinn Féin when the Talks resumed.

11. Ms. O'Hare later rang me back to say that she had been "told" to come back to me to stress that Sinn Féin were deadly earnest about wanting to move things forward quickly. They needed however clarity on the points at issue. They had to be careful to get matters right, but the Irish Government could be certain they were working in good faith for the earliest possible restoration of the ceasefire and needed all the help they could get. I repeated my view that if that was indeed their objective, I thought their handling of the last meeting had damaged it. They should be aware that the point was coming where, if Sinn Féin took no decision, it could amount to a hugely significant decision be default.

Sean Ó hUiginn
29 May 1997

cc: PST
PSS
Mr. P. Teahon
Mr. T. Dalton
Joint Secretary
Ambassadors London & Washington

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✓
PST: PSB; Messrs. Teahan,
Donlon & Dalton;
Ambassadors London &
Washington; Joint Secretary;
Counsellors A-1

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Secure Fax: 508**28 May 1997****No of pages including this one: 3****To: HQ****From: Belfast****For: Second Secretary O hUiginn****From: Joint Secretary****Subj: British Government meeting with Sinn Féin (28 May)**

1. To confirm, I have obtained the following read-out on today's meeting between British Government officials and Sinn Féin at Stormont Castle
2. The meeting ran from noon until approximately 3pm, with a short break for lunch. The British side consisted of Quentin Thomas, Jonathan Stephens and Chris McCabe. Peter Bell understands that the Sinn Féin delegation was unchanged from last time (Martin McGuinness, Gerry Kelly, Caoimhín O Caolain and Siobhan O Hanlon).
3. Today's meeting did not go as well as last week's. The atmosphere was distinctly more combative, with "a lot of hard pounding" on both sides and, it seems, virtually no meeting of minds. The British side's impression was that Sinn Féin were under instructions to express disappointment at whatever British proposal was advanced, though not to take matters to the point of abandoning the dialogue.
4. The British officials opened with a lengthy presentation, approved by Ministers, which set out the new Government's approach to the peace process and reaffirmed the British commitment to the Anglo-Irish Agreement, the Joint Declaration and the Framework Document. They also underlined the new Government's intention to introduce confidence-building measures aimed at both Unionists and nationalists.
5. Taking Sinn Féin through the Entry to Negotiations Act, Thomas highlighted the legal obligation on the Secretary of State to invite Sinn Féin to participate in the talks once the requirements of the legislation have been met. He told Sinn Féin that there would be consultation with the Irish Government in the latter respect. He and his colleagues indicated that some time would be required following a ceasefire declaration to ensure continuing compliance with the latter in word and deed.

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6. In terms which reflected the discussion at yesterday's Liaison Group meeting, Thomas floated the idea of an adjournment of the talks by Senator Mitchell following a ceasefire declaration. Sinn Féin would be invited to make an early commitment to the Mitchell Principles during this period. Contact with British Ministers and access to Castle Buildings were also promised.. Thomas emphasised that the British Government would not be seeking unnecessary delay in relation to Sinn Féin's entry to the talks and that no preconditions would attach to entry beyond the requirements of the legislation.
7. A further point made was that the British Government were prepared in principle to set a date for Sinn Féin's entry but could not do so at the present juncture.
8. Thomas wound up by emphasising that the change of Government had lent a new impetus to the peace process and that the door was now open to Sinn Féin's participation. However, they needed collateral for Sinn Féin's protestations about their commitment to peace and democratic politics.
9. The Sinn Féin response was that they found this presentation very disappointing.

The distance between the two sides remained considerable when the discussion turned in detail to the four key Sinn Féin concerns:

- On the time-frame issue, the British officials referred again to the May 1998 deadline in the legislation. However, Sinn Féin stuck to their previous position that the talks should be completed within six months;
- On confidence-building measures, Sinn Féin, who had been noticeably vague on this subject at the last meeting, made clear that they wanted virtually an agreed programme of measures, among which they awarded priority to prisoner issues;
- On decommissioning, there was a lengthy and fairly unproductive exchange. The British side emphasised the central importance of the Mitchell Report and the need to resolve this issue by sufficient consensus. They were not seeking to create unnecessary blockages but there was a problem here which had to be cracked. "Something approaching agreement" between the two sides was

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reached on the machinery for the handling of decommissioning (a sub-committee and the Commission). However, in general terms, Sinn Féin expressed deep unhappiness at the line taken by Thomas and his colleagues, complaining that what it amounted to in practice was that Trimble would have a veto on the decommissioning issue and, therefore, on the negotiations as a whole. The British response was to reiterate that this problem had to be resolved;

On the entry date issue, Sinn Féin stuck to their demands for immediate entry following a ceasefire declaration. They were not impressed by the scenario painted by the British to cover the period while the ceasefire was being tested, commenting that this amounted all too plainly to a "decontamination" exercise and was unacceptable.

10. Thomas recalled that John Hume had indicated to the British Government last year that the 10 October document could deliver a ceasefire. He suggested that the current British approach went beyond the 10 October text in some respects. The new Government were travelling some distance to get Sinn Féin into the talks and there would have to be some reciprocation on Sinn Féin's part. He asked Sinn Féin whether or not they were serious about the present exercise. When he asked them what particular outcome they wished to see from the current contacts, the response was to the effect that they "did not know".
11. Referring to current media speculation about a possible IRA ceasefire in the autumn, Thomas enquired in general terms if this was the time-frame envisaged by the Republican movement. He emphasised the British Government's desire to make progress as soon as possible, "beginning now". In response, Sinn Féin said that they also wished to make rapid progress but did not offer any clearer commitment.
12. Despite the negative tone of the discussion, there was agreement in principle to have another meeting, though this will not be possible next week because of Sinn Féin's commitments in our election campaign.
13. I understand that no particular arrangements were made in respect of media briefing on today's meeting.