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25/11/97

**Meeting with Sinn Féin Delegation in the Sycamore Room,
Government Buildings, on Friday 19 September 1997 at 11.00a.m.**

Attendance

Taoiseach

Mr. Ray Burke T.D., Minister for Foreign Affairs,
Mr. John O Donoghue T.D., Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform,
Mr. Dermot Gallagher, Department of Foreign Affairs,
Mr. David Cooney, Department of Foreign Affairs,
Mr. Val O'Donnell, Department of Justice,
Dr. Martin Mansergh, Department of the Taoiseach,
Mr. Walter Kirwan, Department of the Taoiseach,
Mr. Paul McGarry, Department of the Taoiseach.

Sinn Féin Delegation

Mr. Gerry Adams,
Mr. Martin McGuinness,
Ms. Rita O'Hare,
Mr. Martin Ferris,
Mr. Séan Crowe,
Ms. Dodi McGuinness.

The Taoiseach welcomed the Sinn Féin delegation on behalf of the Government. He said that at the outset this Government had put all its efforts and energies into progressing the situation. This meeting provided an opportunity to bring Sinn Féin up to date on developments this week. The Taoiseach had had a lot of contact with the British Prime Minister and the Prime Minister had given a lot of time to the Northern Ireland situation and the contacts had been very useful.

The Taoiseach went on to say that he knew how important the prisoners issue was for Sinn Féin and it was raised at every opportunity with the British side.

While there was no formal agenda for this meeting, it would be useful to review what more could be done on prisoners issues and the issues likely to arise during talks. The process would begin quickly and there would be a heavy work load ahead. The Taoiseach said he was conscious that the British Government had greater resources for this type of situation but he was also conscious that the issue was the most vital facing us.

Mr. Adams said that he wanted to cover these points also. He also welcomed the opportunity to meet the Minister for Justice. He also wanted to raise with the

Minister for Foreign Affairs a comment earlier that week by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, when she said that Prime Ministers deal in broad brush strokes and there seemed to have been a misunderstanding about the terms of the arrangements reached with Mr. Trimble.

The Taoiseach said that there could be no misunderstanding or equivocation. The basis of the joint statement by the two Heads of Government was that Mr. Trimble would be in the talks. He signed off on that statement with the British Prime Minister on that basis.

Dr. Mansergh said that Mr. Trimble had almost admitted this when he had said that he would have been in the talks but for the Markethill bomb.

The Taoiseach said that he was clear on what had been agreed to.

The Minister for Foreign Affairs said that it was clear from what Mr. Trimble himself had said that he was to be there on Tuesday. In fact that was why a plenary had been proposed by the Government for 6.00 p.m. on Tuesday, to ensure that that commitment was honoured.

Mr. Adams said that this meeting provided an opportunity to talk about strategy and our views on events as they were unfolding and also to discuss issues within this jurisdiction. He said that if the process became protracted, there would be a risk that confidence would drain away. All the parties, including the two Governments, shared a common objective in trying to get Unionists into the talks. Republicans were sceptical of the Unionist position. Mr. Trimble while saying that he wouldn't have contact with Sinn Féin had been getting involved in alliances with people representing violent groups. People should be aware that these groups had also killed friends and relatives of Sinn Féin members.

There needed to be shared view of how the Irish Government put its case for a new Ireland. The Dublin Government had not had to deal with this type of situation before. Mr. Adams quoted Mr. Ken Bloomfield "if there is to be a United Ireland what intellectual preparation has been made in Southern Ireland"? There had to be a view beyond the tactical level. The process had to be Government led and there had to be more than a half hearted solution that might break down again. It was possible now to achieve a lasting settlement because the Government in London was making constitutional change on its own island, the US Government was engaged in the process and the people around this table had a common objective.

The Taoiseach responded that he had had a round of discussions on Partnership 2000 with the social partners. All of these discussions had started with a presentation on Northern Ireland and all of these groups had ideas for closer

co-operation. Indeed the trade union representatives had been particularly pleased with the consultations undertaken by Mr. Trimble.

At cabinet level, every Minister was to report on a monthly basis on how formal contacts could be developed. Ministers meet a host of organisations and would be giving consideration to what issues could be discussed on an island of Ireland basis. The Taoiseach would keep Sinn Féin briefed on these developments as the process continued.

He added that social partnership in Britain was being promoted as a complement to political partnership. This agenda was being pushed forward. However, some sectors stood to lose out if there was greater North/South co-operation, these included particularly the established administration in Northern Ireland.

Mr. Adams said that these developments were commendable but fundamentally the issue was one of sovereignty - does the Irish Government ever ask the British to leave? He also commended Mr Bill Tosh for standing up to Unionists over their withdrawal from the lunch attended by Mitchell Mc Laughlin.

Dr. Mansergh said that the issue of constitutional change could be described as either; a refinement of the Framework Document; constitutional change as has taken place in Scotland and Wales; or a wider, more radical approach through Strand 3.

Mr. Adams said that the emphasis in the news last week was on the process leading to a new Stormont type Assembly.

Mr. Gallagher said that Unionists knew that the key issue was Strand 3 and that sovereignty could be described as psychological, political or territorial. He believed that psychologically the British were withdrawing from the situation. If there were dynamic all Ireland bodies then the situation would change radically.

Mr. Adams said that the challenge now was to get Unionists to accept the change in the political landscape. He accepted that what Mr. Gallagher referred to would be such a change.

The Minister for Foreign Affairs said that the problem last week was in devising a wording to get Unionists into the process. Since Wednesday, Mr. David Cooney had meetings with the British on the procedural motion. The UUP wanted the motion tabled in such a way that it could be adopted quickly and that it should be kept as tight as possible. Sinn Féin would be kept closely briefed on the motion. The intention was to table it and vote on it on Wednesday, at the latest. The British Prime Minister would have further contact with Mr. Trimble. It was hoped that there would be no discussion on the motion and that once it

went through, the Business Committee would be set up and the 3 Strand process would start.

Mr. Adams said that he hoped that we would not be into a re-run of the ad-hocery of last week's events.

The Taoiseach said that over the weekend he hoped to tie down the position again with the British Prime Minister in the course of a telephone review of the week's events.

Mr. McGuinness said that Unionists seemed to be dictating the pace. They could stretch this out to their Conference in October or even to Christmas. The Governments needed to dictate the pace. Sinn Féin was not worried about the indictment next week but the Unionists could attempt to undermine all their efforts. Unionists had been stressing that they were not negotiating with Sinn Féin and they pulled out of a meeting with the SDLP this week. Neither would they meet the Irish Government and they wouldn't accept that these were dynamic talks about the future of governance in Ireland. There would be serious difficulties if no progress was made. While Mr. Trimble was under pressure from his own constituency who wanted to see negotiations, the only way forward was not to allow the current level of frustration to continue.

The Minister for Foreign Affairs said that these were the same points that he made to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland last week. He had also had discussions with Lord Alderdice who had not been consistent in his view on the procedural motion. The Minister had urged the Secretary of State to ensure that the agreement made at Head of Government level was honoured. One way or another the procedural motion would be put down on Wednesday next at the latest. The motion was still being worked on in an effort to ensure that it was as brief as possible.

Mr. Kirwan said that the Unionists may be preparing to put down a motion of their own which included the points of theirs not covered in the Government's motion. However the procedural motion would be put down by the two Governments. The Unionists could put down whatever motion they wished but it would need sufficient support.

The Minister for Foreign Affairs said that it was the clear intention of the two Governments to put the motion on Wednesday. It would be best if this was agreed by all parties and this was where it was hoped that discussions with the British Prime Minister would prove effective. If the Unionists were not on board, it was hoped that they would be in shortly.

Mr. Adams said that the Unionists would only come in on their own terms and that the British Prime Minister had to know the Unionist game plan.

The Taoiseach said that he was in no doubt that the British Prime Minister was acting in good faith and that the agreement last week had to be honoured. There had been no indication from the British Prime Minister that this couldn't be delivered. The Taoiseach also believed that the British Prime Minister accepted that real negotiations were being entered into.

Mr. Gallagher added that officials on the British side were up-beat. Mr. Trimble might take a tough line with the Secretary of State and Minister Murphy but he had a different approach with the Prime Minister.

The Taoiseach commented that it was interesting that in the middle of two referendum campaigns and all the events arising from the death of Princess Diana, the British Prime Minister had spent such a lot of time with Mr. Trimble and on this issue generally.

Mr. Adams referred to the need to bring a team of the best civil service brains together to deal solely with the peace talks. He also said that the British had been blaming Dublin for delays in the repatriation of prisoners, attributed to staff shortages in Dublin.

Mr. Gallagher said that he would have proposals for a special talks team ready for discussion next Wednesday. The team would put particular emphasis on document analysis and rapid reaction would be crucial.

The Minister for Foreign Affairs said that 90% of his time had been devoted to Northern Ireland. He respected the high calibre of officials dealing with the issue in both the Department of the Taoiseach and Foreign Affairs who were working closely together.

Mr. McGuinness said that while Strand 2 was very important, he believed that Strand 3 will be the most important strand and work in this area could begin now, indeed could have started three months ago. If there was a shift in the Unionist position that would be because of British pressure. The Irish Government needed to get close contacts with the British Prime Minister and the Secretary of State. The British had a security dominated strategy until now and this needed to move towards a political strategy.

In passing, Mr. McGuinness said that the grenade in Derry landed in the garden of Ms. Marion Hutchins, a newly elected Sinn Féin Councillor. Sinn Féin had had contacts with the IRSP and the CAC to try to bring about a total cessation of violence, but without success.

The Minister for Foreign Affairs said that there were ongoing contacts between the two Governments. However, the Strand 3 process could not be started at present without going outside the present talks process and, in that situation, one would be into proximity talks, with the associated disadvantages. Unofficially there were ongoing talks and contacts, but the three strands must be dealt with together.

Mr. Gallagher said that Strand 3 would be the key, but that Strand 2 and Strand 3 were inter linked. Strand 3 would be a crucial negotiating weapon if there was no progress on Strand 2. Unionists would fear that a deal was being done over their heads, as in 1985: this was one of their greatest fears.

Mr. Adams said that it was also important that the Irish Government engage with the establishment in Britain and engage with British public opinion.

Mr. McGuinness said that he had met with prisoners in Maheraberry and Long Kesh and they fully endorsed the Sinn Féin strategy. The prisoners issue was crucial to the process and was a very emotive issue in the community. They also met with the women prisoners who also endorsed the process. Mr. McGuinness referred to the situation of Ella O'Dwyer from Co. Tipperary who was on temporary transfer and, being subject to Home Office rules, was not entitled to compassionate leave though her father was very ill. The Taoiseach said that he had raised this issue as well as the Full Sutton issue. Mr. McGuinness also referred to the case of Róisín McAlliskey who was having severe difficulties and would probably not be charged with any crime.

Mr. Ferris said he had met with the Portlaoise prisoners who were very supportive of the process and the leadership. However, it was incumbent on this Government to send a positive signal to the wider Republican family. He referred to the case of Séan Kinsella who had served 22 years in prison in Britain and had been picked up and was now being held in custody in this jurisdiction. On the question of repatriation of prisoners, he had met with Justice officials who in discussing delays in the process had blamed a shortage of staff and in the cases of Dingus McGee and Liam O'Dwyer, the fact that the courts were in recess and a High Court Judge couldn't be found to process their cases.

Mr. Adams referred to ongoing harassment of Sinn Féin activists. He mentioned the meeting that culminated in the cessation of violence where activists were brought from all over the country and yet the Special Branch maintained an intrusive presence.

He said that the IRA were wrong in the killing of Gerry McCabe and in other killings. He understood how the Gardaí felt and also that it was their job to

prevent illegal activity, but the Government needed to have a sense of the heaviness of the Special Branch presence. Sinn Féin had never recovered from the harassment of activists in the past. While this was not a big issue it was significant for their people.

Ms. Dodi McGuinness said that the regime for prisoners in England was starting to tighten up again. Also DNA testing of Republican prisoners might also become an issue. The issue of temporary transfer needed addressing and could be dealt with. The prisoners issue was the most emotive issue for Nationalists. Despite Unionist fears, prisoners issues should be dealt with. The steps taken recently, as regards extra time for compassionate leave, were not seen as all that helpful, as they did not apply to all prisoners.

Mr. Adams said that it was very important to bear in mind that people in the establishment in Northern Ireland didn't want this process to work. There would be resistance but the process needed to be pushed.

The Minister for Justice said that he was conscious of the need to move on the prisoners issue. If there were staffing problems in the Department they would be addressed.

Mr. Adams said that it was important to address these types of issues to show people that there was a change and that leadership was working. The RUC were now going into Crossmaglen to check on tax discs and they had also harassed young people in Derry. They were not dealing with the situation in a common sense way or with people at a human level. Also given the time-table, there needed to be a sense of movement on the prisoners issues.

The Minister for Justice said that the repatriation of prisoners took time, but the matter was a priority for the Government. It should be recognised that, as they stand, procedures between Ireland and England for the transfer of prisoners were faster than between any other country. Mr. Straw recently wrote to the Minister for Justice and asked if the Irish authorities would respect the integrity of the sentence of prisoners transferred and that commitment had to be given and was given. We did not under-estimate the importance of the issue to Sinn Féin and it would be looked at again at the end of the month. There was a difference between harassment and normal policing and it was important that this should be kept under review. The release of prisoners would continue as the situation developed.

Mr. Adams said that if Sinn Féin was recognised as a legitimate political party then their activists should not be subjected to harassment.

Mr. Ferris said that he met with Mr. Tim Dalton of the Department of Justice yesterday and he was followed all the way from his home in Kerry by the Special Branch.

The Minister for Justice accepted the point that was being made.

Mr. Adams said that the prisoners issue was a matter of confidence in the Government and was a recognition that the security position had changed.

The Taoiseach said that it shouldn't be assumed either way that prisoners would or would not be released at or before the end of the month.

The Minister for Justice said that he had to be careful, but he was committed to the need for confidence.

The Taoiseach referred to recent contacts he had had where it was indicated that the RUC had been saying that targeting had been taking place again.

Mr. Adams referred to the last cessation, which he believed was a good cessation, where, if as much targeting as had been alleged had actually been taking place, would have led to far more deaths and violence after the cessation ended.

The Minister for Foreign Affairs said that he had asked the Irish Ambassador in London to take up the issue of DNA testing. He would also ask him to take up the situation with regard to visiting conditions in Belmarsh and Full Sutton. Ms. McGuinness mentioned that in Belmarsh the space between prisoners and visitors had been widened.

Mr. Adams referred to two further issues that he wished to raise, the Committee of the Parties and the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation.

The Taoiseach said that he was trying to arrange an October meeting of the Forum and it was understood that Ms. Nora Owen had no difficulties with this. Tactically it might be preferable to have a meeting one month from Wednesday next, to assess if progress was being made. The Government was also ready to move on the Committee of the Parties. A meeting of this should take place separate to a meeting of the Forum.

Regarding accommodation for Sinn Féin at the talks venue at Castle Buildings, an extra room, with a window, had been made available from within the Irish Government's area, with the agreement of the Irish Government.

The Minister for Foreign Affairs referred to a decision, the previous day, by the Advisory Committee to the International Fund for Ireland (IFI) to recommend funding for the Top of the Rock project on the White Rock Road in Belfast. The decision would go to the full board of the IFI next week, but this was a formality and the grant would be for £800,000.

It was agreed at the end of the meeting that the Government and Sinn Féin would keep in touch.