

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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Taoiseach's Meeting with President Clinton,

White House, 17 March 1999

1. The Taoiseach, accompanied by the Minister of State, met with President Clinton in the Oval Office on 17 March. The meeting followed immediately on the presentation of shamrock, which this year, unusually, took place in the Rose Garden. Present with the President were the Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, National Security Adviser Sandy Berger, Deputy Adviser Jim Steinberg, Jim Lyons, Antony Blinken and Larry Butler, NSC and Ambassador Sullivan. With the Taoiseach and Minister of State were Ambassador O'Huiginn, Dermot Gallagher, Martin Mansergh, Wally Kirwan, Joe Lennon and Pat Hennessy.

2. Picking up a conversation which began when the President and Taoiseach rode together from the Capitol to the White House, the President reiterated his readiness to help in any way possible to move the process forward.

3. The Taoiseach said that the significant progress made over the past year meant that we were left with only one major issue to resolve. If that could be done we were ready to begin work immediately in the various institutions whose terms of reference had now been agreed. It was inevitable as we neared this critical point that those on both sides who wanted to derail the process would intensify their efforts. However, it was vital that momentum be sustained. With the marching season fast approaching, any suggestion of stalling or parking the talks was highly dangerous. It was essential that a major effort be made to resolve the impasse over the next two weeks.

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4. The Taoiseach said that in the current climate words alone would likely be insufficient for this purpose. While, like everyone else, he had found Trimble difficult in the beginning, he had developed a good working relationship with him, and felt that the interests of the process would not be served by losing Trimble and having to begin over with a new leader. We therefore need to find a solution which will allow Trimble to survive politically.

5. On the other side, Gerry Adams also has a genuine fear that pushing too hard could cause the Republican movement to split. We have tried to help by, for example, persuading Tony Blair to state explicitly in his speech to the Dail last year that there was no question of surrender to the British authorities. Any solution must involve movement on both sides, and will require considerable ingenuity. Where the US can be helpful is in convincing Adams and Trimble that delay is fatal to both their interests. In this respect, while Sinn Fein might six months ago have argued with some justification that a move on decommissioning would be pocketed, the situation now is quite different: a deal now will be followed immediately by the setting up of the Executive, meetings of the North-South Council and other concrete actions which will demonstrate unambiguously to the nationalist community the gains which the Agreement represents. The alternative the Taoiseach pointed out, was disaster. Differences between the parties would fester and exacerbate over the summer, leaving prospects for a settlement greatly reduced. The President's assistance in helping to convince the parties of the urgency of the situation would be greatly appreciated.

6. In response to an inquiry from the President as to Adams' ability to "deliver" the IRA on decommissioning, the Taoiseach said that the constraints on Adams were real, and there had already been a number of defections. However, he felt that in the context

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of an agreed package, the leakage could be kept within bounds. In this regard, personal risk is a constant for Trimble and Adams: the Taoiseach noted one instance where security had uncovered indications of this. The reality of the threat level was brought home by the murder of Rosemary Nelson (well-known as an expert witness on Capitol Hill), clearly timed to coincide with the round of meetings in Washington.

7. Agreeing with the President that Trimble could not move without some cover on this issue, the Minister of State said that decommissioning was also important to opinion in the Republic, who saw it as a test of democratic credentials. Statements by the IRA that they would "never" decommission caused real difficulties and contributed to a heightening of uncertainty. What was needed to reduce tension was an intensification of the dialogue now under way between Adams and Trimble. Berger commented that Trimble had earlier mentioned to him that he first heard of his meeting with Adams from local television (they met later in the White House - see separate report).

8. Given that the commitments on decommissioning in the Agreement were relatively loose, the President wondered what was the real basis for IRA thinking on this issue: was it an insistence on sticking to the terms of the Agreement; was it fear of a split; or was it the case that they never intended to decommission?

9. The Taoiseach agreed there were a number of factors, but thought fear of a split the most compelling. While Adams was genuinely trying to make progress, many of those behind him saw decommissioning as an issue which logically only arose once the new institutions were up and running. Comments by the IRA during the referendum campaign which appeared to rule out decommissioning in any

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circumstance had been particularly unsettling to the Unionist community. If Sinn Fein had acquiesced in that position, the process would have been effectively over.

10. Noting that any hand-over of IRA weapons would be "fungible" - with stocks easily replenished - the President speculated that IRA unwillingness to make even a cosmetic gesture suggested that the issue had a significant theological dimension. Secretary Gallagher said that the IRA was extremely sensitive to any perceived equation of their campaign with criminality. Any demand, therefore, which might be interpreted as casting doubt on their own perceived legitimacy created a problem for them. The Sinn Féin approach was also based on a very precise reading of the Agreement and their view, arising from this, that decommissioning could only be considered in the context of the full implementation of its provisions.

11. Steinberg commented that delay will always have some attraction for Adams, since it will defer, and probably help to minimize, the likely split in the organization. Ambassador O'Huiginn suggested that the Adams strategy is to by-pass rather than confront the potential dissident element, and that the Sinn Fein leader wants to handle decommissioning consistent with that approach. Moreover, in the IRA analysis, the point at which they agree to decommission represents the acknowledged end point of their struggle, and they were nervous that this defining point might be judged as betrayal of the sacrifices of this and previous generations of the Republican Movement. Sandy Berger, noting the two year time-table for the completion of decommissioning, surmised that a long drawn out process might not suit Adams politically, and, if unavoidable, he may prefer to deal with the issue in a shorter, more intense, cycle towards the end of the period.

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12. Noting that the "Sinn Fein position, as relayed to the US side, had always included the prospect of movement on decommissioning, in the context of progress on other issues, the President commented that Trimble needed to show some practical gains on decommissioning. The Taoiseach agreed with this analysis, and commented that Paisley stood ready to exploit any vulnerabilities in Trimble's position in the European elections.

13. The meeting concluded with the President and Taoiseach agreeing to liaise closely in their efforts to push for a resolution this side of the anniversary of the Agreement.

P Hennessy
22 March 1999

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