

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
National Archives

Reference Code:	2022/84/39
Creator(s):	Department of the Taoiseach
Accession Conditions:	Open
Copyright:	National Archives, Ireland. May only be reproduced with the written permission of the Director of the National Archives.

AMBASÁID NA hEIREANN, LONDAIN
IRISH EMBASSY, LONDON

17, GROSVENOR PLACE,
SW1X 7HR
Telephone: 0171-235 2171
Direct Line: 0171-201 2
Fax: 0171-245 6961

14 June 1999

Mr. Dermot Gallagher
Second Secretary
Anglo-Irish Division
Department of Foreign Affairs

Dear Secretary,

Conversations with Bill Jeffrey and Jonathan Stephens

My wife and I were guests to dinner on Friday evening at the home of Jonathan Stephens of the NIO. Also present were one of the Stephens' neighbours and Jonathan's colleague Bill Jeffrey and his wife Joan. Joan is a civil servant who shortly takes up a new assignment in the Lord Chancellor's Department. Penny Stephens will be ordained in the Church of England at the beginning of July and takes up a position as a curate in a London parish immediately afterwards.

Bill Jeffrey, whom I sat beside at dinner, initiated a private conversation on the current impasse. Earlier in the day he had had a thirty minute meeting with Adams and McGuinness ("Gerry and Martin") following their short meeting with the Secretary of State. Jeffrey said that Adams and McGuinness were relaxed and cheerful and that the meeting took place in a good atmosphere. On decommissioning, however, they gave nothing away, while insisting on the very early running of d'Hondt.

Jeffrey said that Mo Mowlam is "very keen, and rightly" to run d'Hondt this week. His own best guess is that an adequate result for Nicholson in the European Parliament elections will permit this to happen.

I asked Jeffrey about the visit by Trimble, Taylor and Empey to Downing Street

©TSCH/2022/84/39

on Thursday evening. Jeffrey was not present at that meeting. From the reports he had had, he was not inclined to draw strongly negative conclusions, on the grounds that the meeting was part of a negotiation. Jeffrey characterised Trimble on the one hand and Adams and McGuinness on the other as "the most unforgiving negotiators I have ever met". But both sides, according to Jeffrey, are very anxious to implement the Agreement.

I asked Jeffrey what Trimble needs to agree to a package. Jeffrey responded that in simple terms the answer is "more than words". Explaining this, Jeffrey adopted a sanguine view of Republican intentions. He said that a reasonable interpretation of the ongoing dialogue with Sinn Fein is that decommissioning will occur by May 2000 if other aspects of the Good Friday Agreement work out. Jeffrey emphasised that he was relying not on explicit commitments but on indications and on the general assumption that the Republican movement tries not to be deliberately misleading. The political problem, however, is that Trimble cannot reassure his own constituency on the basis that he trusts the Republican movement. He cannot leave himself open to the accusation that he has accepted mere words.

As to what would satisfy Trimble, Jeffrey said that a fixed date for a start to decommissioning would almost certainly be enough. This would seem to be in the Republican interest and also to be "doable". But the signs are that the IRA will not agree to this. A reassuring statement in the name of the IRA would be helpful: "every little bit counts". Jeffrey suggested that the engagement by the Irish government with Sinn Fein is crucial. In these discussions, no proposals should be ruled out. What exactly Trimble needs, however, is not yet quite clear.

Jeffrey, who took, I thought, a noticeably moderate line throughout, said that it is essential to remind ourselves that neither Trimble nor Sinn Fein have revealed their bottom lines. Jeffrey declared himself hopeful, therefore, regarding the coming fortnight. Failure to agree would have "very serious consequences".

Jonathan Stephens, joining the discussion, suggested that 30 June is a deadline, but not a deadline on which to stake everything. Insofar as he personally is hopeful or confident, it is more with regard to the long term than with regard to the prospects for a deal by 30 June.

I observed that 30 June has been pinpointed as a watershed. Jeffrey said that it is a "deadline" and that it is "absolute" but that it may not be wise at this stage to say much more.

©TSCH/2022/84/39

There was a certain amount of general discussion around the table led by Penny Stephens. (She made clear her own disposition by some generous remarks on prisoners and by recounting how she had approached Trimble at a social event to ask him why Orangemen feel they must march on the Garvaghy Road.) One of the questions asked by Penny Stephens was whether the Sinn Fein leadership could ever go back to violence.

// Both Stephens and Jeffrey took the view that the IRA remains collectively capable of returning to violence. They made the point that Adams and McGuinness are personally removed from the business of "loading the truck that takes explosives to England". Even if they were carried along by a renewal of violence, they might not feel they were violating the norms of personal friendship - any more than senior NIO officials would necessarily recognise a taboo against the arrest in new circumstances of Republican activists with whom there had been political contact.

// Stephens and Jeffrey remarked that David Trimble and his party are generally more hostile and suspicious towards them than towards Irish colleagues.

Yours sincerely,

Philip McDonagh

Philip McDonagh
Counsellor

©TSCH/2022/84/39