

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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MEETING WITH SINN FEIN, 12 JANUARY 1999

Paddy Teahon, Dermot Gallagher, Tim Dalton and myself, met with a Sinn Fein delegation led my Martin McGuinness, accompanied by Bairbre de Bruin, Seán Crowe and Joe O'Reilly. Martin McGuinness had a separate bilateral meeting with the Taoiseach, accompanied by Paddy Teahon, at the end of the meeting.

Paddy Teahon opened the meeting by expressing concern about what had happened in Stormont on 18 December.

Martin McGuinness said they were deflated by the outcome. David Trimble had succeeded in hollowing out the main elements of the implementation bodies, which were 'no great shakes'. The two Governments did not do enough to defend Sinn Fein's right to be involved, and it shook confidence. John Hume seemed detached, and the power base in the SDLP seemed to have shifted to the 'FG wing', some of whom were more hostile than the Ulster Unionists. If the Unionists were to continue to be allowed to have their way, the project would become unsustainable. They could not deliver decommissioning against this background, or give political succour to a Unionist precondition. The British could trigger the establishment of the Executive. The 50-50 composition of the Executive, he conceded, was a good news message. Republicans had swallowed a number of pills on Articles 2 and 3, consent, the Assembly, David Trimble as first Minister- they had negotiated on these

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matters and lost - but the Unionists had lost the argument on decommissioning. Donaldson was successfully pushing the agenda.

Dermot Gallagher stressed the positive aspects of the Agreement and the potential of the sectoral councils. Unionists had split six ways. Trimble was on a knife edge.

Paddy Teahon strongly defended the role of the Irish Government in the events of 18 December. What was needed now was a specific understanding as to how the decommissioning bit of the Agreement would be put in place. Facing up to realities was not an attempt to renegotiate. How would it get dealt with in specifics ? The Taoiseach had followed through on prisoners.

Martin McGuinness returning to the events of 18 December. He said the British Government had treated then as if they were a nuisance and an annoyance. They felt humiliated. Being kept informed was not the same as being involved.

I said that the Taoiseach had sent up P. Teahon and D. Gallagher to smooth liaison and among other things ensure that Sinn Féin were involved and consulted.

Martin McGuinness said the lesson was that they would have to fight their corner more trenchantly in the future. Sinn Féin was now formally requesting a trilateral.

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I made the point that we could not force the Unionists to go down a particular road. Outside Northern Ireland, both the Ulster Unionists and Sinn Féin would be blamed for the impasse. In dialogue 4-5 years ago, it was always the understanding that decommissioning formed part of demilitarisation. I considered the future open with many political battles ahead. But the whole logic was that, if Irish unity were to be a serious proposition, we had to start tackling the fears of more reasonable and moderate sections of Unionist opinion.

Tim Dalton recognised there was an extreme difficulty with decommissioning and a huge risk involved. The statement in the Agreement was fairly bland. There was a need to present it more positively. Against a background of positive political developments, the IRA would need to firm up proposals with de Chastelain.

Dermot Gallagher said the Irish Government was a resource, and wanted to be helpful and creative. He spoke about a package where things happened virtually simultaneously, and where there could be a voluntary gesture.

McGuinness said there was no equivalent culpability between the Ulster Unionists and Sinn Féin. The Unionists were acting against the spirit and letter of the Good Friday Agreement. He had never said he could guarantee decommissioning within 2 years, merely that they would use their influence. There was no friendship, generosity or magnanimity from the Unionists. David Trimble should not be allowed to turn the Irish against Sinn Fein. The whole project would collapse. If he went to the IRA, they would split in pieces. This was not a negotiating stance, but a survival process. We needed to get our

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heads around the fact that Trimble could fall. The only way was for de Chastelain to resolve it with the support of the two Government. The biggest mistake of the last 9 months was to give Trimble the notion that his tactic of freezing out Sinn Féin could succeed.

Tim Dalton said that if Unionists totally refused to play ball, structures would not come into being, and there would very quickly be an erosion of support for the Agreement among Republicans and Loyalists. The Taoiseach would expect something quite forward by way of what was put to de Chastelain.

13 January 1999

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