

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
National Archives

Reference Code:	2022/84/41
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 hÉIREANN
TELEPHONE: (202) 462-3939
FAX: (202) 232-5993

EMBASSY OF IRELAND
2234 MASSACHUSETTS AVE., N.W.
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20008

24

MONDAY, 22 MAR 1999

19 March 1999

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

Dear Secretary

On the basis of conversations with the White House (Butler mainly, since Steinberg left for Germany shortly after St Patrick's Day) and Ms O'Hare of Sinn Féin, the following is the fullest account we can assemble of the key White House contacts with the parties:

1. Sinn Féin - NSC (led by Adams and Berger respectively) 17 March

The meeting lasted about an hour.

Berger opened with reference to Garvaghy Road and the Nelson killing. He said that Mo Mowlam understood the emotions involved but she wanted convictions, (the implication being that RUC involvement was necessary for that purpose). However the need for credibility in the investigation was fully understood all round. Adams countered with his analysis of nationalist concerns and called for an international and independent enquiry, to include the Finucane case also.

©TSCH/2022/84/41

Berger again endorsing the need for credibility, observed the killers would be empowered if the process ground to a halt, thus pointing to the need for Sinn Féin flexibility. Adams said he did not contemplate failure. He was open to looking at words, but that exercise was useful only if Trimble bought into it. The Sinn Féin problem was they did not know Trimble's bottom line.

Berger felt both sides wanted the process to work, but that they needed some equation to get round the present difficulty. What exactly did Sinn Féin want for their part of the equation? Adams avoided a direct answer on this but spoke in general terms of the need for Trimble to engage in dialogue with the Garvaghy Road residents. He felt that allowing deadlines to pass had simply increased the unionist will and capacity to procrastinate. Sinn Féin accepted Mo Mowlam's word on launching the D'Hondt mechanism. The British were going slow on the demilitarisation agenda, keeping it as a bargaining counter. Sinn Féin were realistic that the equality agenda needed time to be implemented but that did not apply to harassment in South Armagh or other aspects of the security agenda, such as covering up the fact, which he said had slipped out only in the inquest on Terry Enright, that he had been killed by a security force weapon.

Berger asked whether Adams accepted that Trimble needed decommissioning at some point. Adams replied that he accepted that decommissioning would either "happen or become irrelevant". He thought Trimble could survive with the loss of four or five supporters. In the perspective of Drumcree, the marching season and the EU elections,

©TSCH/2022/84/41

he felt that unless Trimble engaged very soon the prospects were very gloomy.

Berger asked pointedly whether Sinn Féin's interest was to have Trimble survive in a weakened state. Adams denied this and stressed the need for supporters of the agreement to hold together. Berger said that Trimble had evinced more flexibility than the US side had anticipated. He was insisting that the package had to include some decommissioning but he had shown a degree of flexibility on how, or in what context this was to be done.

II. Sinn Féin Meeting with President Clinton, 17 March

Meeting went 10-15 minutes beyond the allotted thirty minutes.

President Clinton opened the meeting with the direct question "how do we get out of this?" Adams said that failure could not be contemplated. The President said that once the marching season kicked in the chances of progress became very slim. Adams said DeChastelain had to be used to sort things out. Sinn Féin were looking for words to do that, but the exercise would be useless unless Trimble was in the loop. Adams' position had already been undermined because his September statement had been pocketed and ignored.

The President said Trimble told him he would fall if there was no decommissioning. He assured the Sinn Féin delegation that he himself had stressed to Trimble that if the IRA were merely "low life", cynically playing a tactical game, they could easily

©TSCH/2022/84/41

organise some deceptive gesture or hand over. He had put it to Trimble that the fact that they did not do so was a sign they were serious about the process. Adams stressed the need to keep the Sinn Féin constituency on board and to hold his movement together.

The President emphasised that Adams and Trimble should work things out between themselves over the next ten days. The "fix" required that no one emerged defeated and that both could somehow win. Adams should talk to Trimble directly and specifically about creating that scenario. A deal done between President, Taoiseach and Blair would not work. He said Adams should ask Trimble directly what he wanted. Adams said he had done so but he had no clear picture of what the answer was. The President said if there were four or five things he could do to help the process of dialogue he had recommended, Adams should tell him. Adams again deplored his inability to elicit straight answers from Trimble and the President repeated his earlier point that the IRA position paradoxically meant they were serious rather than cynically manipulative in their dealings with the arms issue.

Berger observed that a flaw of the Middle East process was that the Palestinians were talking through the Americans rather than directly, although he acknowledged that part of the Good Friday Agreement was achieved through intermediaries. The peace process would only become alive when the three Governments became irrelevant and when problems were resolved by the Northern leaders working together.

President Clinton said that, in Adams shoes, he would want to know what Trimble

©TSCH/2022/84/41

could do without falling over. Outsiders were saying "why not decommission". Adams and Trimble should agree between them what others could do to help them keep the process on the rails.

Adams said this had to be done in the context of the terms of the Agreement, but within those limits Sinn Féin would look at words and do whatever was reasonable. They were determined not to fail.

The White House felt the meetings with Adams were among the best they have had with him, with Adams getting straight to the point and resisting the tendency to rehearse more long-standing complaints. The President encouraged Adams to meet with Trimble (who had earlier claimed to Berger that the first he knew of a meeting with Adams was when he heard of it on television). The President used his meetings with both to encourage them to show the other their real bottom line.

Meetings with Trimble and Mallon, 17th March

The President told Trimble he recognised that the UUP leader faced real political difficulties and had limited room for manoeuvre. But he asked him to accept also that Adams faced serious constraints (and reiterated the point that the Republican Movement's unwillingness to make a cosmetic gesture on decommissioning - which could easily be compensated for with new acquisitions - was itself proof of the seriousness with which they were approaching the issue). Trimble did not add significantly to his stated position on decommissioning, but was seen to leave some "wiggle" room on the exact point at which the first instalment of actual

©TSCH/2022/84/41

decommissioning took place. Seamus Mallon, whose bearing and presentation impressed the White House team, used his meeting with the President to outline and commend his scenario for admitting Sinn Féin on a contingency basis - effectively an up-front guarantee rather than an up-front handover. His feeling was that given the constraints on both sides the agenda would eventually narrow down to this, which he saw as the most promising way out of the impasse.

III. Meeting between Trimble and Adams, 17th March

After the "oval room" reception on St. Patrick's night the President flatteringly left them the use of his own office for their tête-a-tête, which lasted about 30 minutes. (A decanter of Tirconnel whiskey had been set invitingly on the table, but was not broached). Adams account of the meeting (the only one we got) was that Trimble was relaxed and cordial, but unyielding and sweeping in his demands.

Trimble told Adams that the LVF had been supposed to surrender Powergel but had not. Adams understood his point to be that the LVF precedent, plus the missing Powergel, set a kind of benchmark for the IRA. A high multiple was needed in terms of quantity to make the IRA handover similarly proportionate to the total IRA arsenal as the LVF's to theirs. It would have to comprise a selection from each category of weapon, and be clearly seen as part of a process which progressed incrementally in each of the categories. Adams countered that Trimble had to know that that scenario was simply not deliverable. Trimble invoked the Taoiseach repeatedly in exchanges which circled around whether this kind of demand was reasonable or deliverable, but they did not advance matters beyond agreement to have a further meeting in Belfast

©TSCH/2022/84/41

next week. Adams assessment of the meeting was gloomy, on grounds that Trimble used their first tête-a-tête to 'up the ante', as he saw it, rather than to explore any possibility of common ground.

Adams and O'Hare subsequently went to see Steinberg and Butler to brief them on the Trimble meeting. Steinberg professed surprise to them on Trimble's position, repeated assurances about the President's commitment and willingness to help and told them he (Steinberg) would travel to Ireland very soon for a few days. (At an earlier engagement with Steinberg where I was present, Adams had strongly urged the need to resolve issues before the March 29th deadline. Steinberg had said he felt Trimble needed not so much to "win" on decommissioning as "not to be seen to lose" and said the US would strongly support the search for compromise on those lines.)

Our note of the Taoiseach's meeting with President Clinton at the White House will follow shortly for your records.

Yours sincerely

Sean O'Huiginn

Sean O'Huiginn
Ambassador

©TSCH/2022/84/41

SECURE-FX TRANSMISSION