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Summary of meeting between Officials and Sinn Féin

Belfast, 28 May 1999

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1. Sinn Féin were represented by Martin McGuinness and Aidan McAteer, while the Government team consisted of Paddy Teahon, Tim Dalton, Martin Mansergh and the undersigned.

Loyalist Attacks

2. McGuinness began by expressing serious concern about the continuing spate of Loyalist attacks, in particular the recent hand grenade attack on a Catholic pub in Belfast. If the grenade had not bounced off the specially installed security windows of the pub, large scale casualties would have been certain. This would have had horrendous implications for the peace process.

Unionist Leadership

2. McGuinness said that, realistically, the UUP would not now agree to the running of d'Hondt in advance of the European elections. He also had a question mark over their willingness to do so at any time in advance of the 30th June. This led him to question Trimble's overall commitment to the Agreement, as against his attraction to the "trappings of power". On the other hand, he said John Taylor had been quite positive when he met him earlier in the week, and had spoken about the need to take Paisley on with a forward-looking message in the elections.

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4. In assessing Trimble's position, McGuinness felt he could take his Assembly party with him in moving forward with the implementation of the Agreement, but he would probably lose a third of the wider party in the process. In many ways, Trimble's difficulties came down to the quality and particularly the lack of decisiveness of his leadership. If Adams and himself hadn't led from the front, the split in the Republican movement could have been much more significant. Interestingly, McGuinness also made the point that, if Jeffrey Donaldson had continued to support Trimble, the latter would probably have taken on the old guard in the party.

D'Hondt and the Way Forward

5. The Sinn Féin side emphasised the need to run d'Hondt as soon as possible and, at the latest, immediately after the European elections. A key concern for them was the unacceptability of any move, through amending Standing Orders, to create second tier Ministers. Any public sense of this was simply not sustainable for them. At the same time, Sinn Féin would be prepared to work out an acommodation directly with Trimble which would offer him the necessary private reassurance about how Ministers would conduct themselves during the Shadow period. There would be no flaunting of positions, and no political embarrassment to Trimble.

30 June date

6. The strong message from Sinn Féin was that the 30th June deadline must be rigidly adhered to. In this regard, McAteer emphasised that, if there was any ambiguity in the approach of the governments, Unionists would seize it. Essentially, Unionists didn't want change, while Republicans badly and urgently needed it.

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7. It should be made absolutely clear, therefore, that if there was not agreement at the end of June, the insititutions of the Agreement would be suspended. This should include the posts of First and Deputy First Minister; Trimble and Mallon should not be allowed to continue to benefit politically from holding office in the absence of the establishment of the institutions (we felt that this was especially directed at the SDLP being advantaged from the status of the Deputy First Minister post).

8. In order to make it absolutely clear that the 30th June was a finite date, Tony Blair should consider (a) issuing a strong public statement to this effect over the heads of the UUP party, and (b) meeting the UUP Assembly party as a group.

Demilitarisation

9. Much more than in the past, Sinn Féin placed a very strong emphasis on the need to move the demilitarisation agenda forward in tandem with the political negotiations. We took away the message that, if substantial progress could be made on this agenda in private, it would give Sinn Féin greater - and perhaps significantly greater - flexibility in the wider talks. The British, therefore, urgently need to designate some very senior personnel - ideally from the Prime Minister's Office and the Ministry of Defence - to work confidentially with Sinn Féin on a demilitarisation package, on the basis that this would only be signed off on in the context of a breakthrough on the political front.

Sinn Féin words

10. While McGuinness said that their Downing Street words were now off the table, he also indicated that they would again be available on the "cast-iron

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basis" that institutions were being set up. We had a sense also that, in the right circumstances, the Sinn Féin Leadership may have some flexibility to be more forward in their language than at Downing Street.

IRA statement

11. We pressed the Sinn Féin team hard on the importance of an IRA statement, emphasising that it could possibly be a "clincher" in the final negotiations. McGuinness said that such a statement was "virtually impossible" and, if they pressed for one, this might produce an unhelpful text. The IRA statement of 31 March had been very positive, but had received little attention. He went on to say that even using the Sinn Féin words from Downing Street would give the leadership "massive difficulty".

12. While McGuinness and McAteer gave no ground on either more forward Sinn Féin words or on any possibility of an IRA statement, we had the overall sense that the leadership has somewhat more room for manoeuvre than they are signalling. Their message was at times fairly stark, but their "body language" throughout was fairly relaxed and comfortable. However, to have any real hope of exploiting this flexibility, it is essential that (a) d'Hondt is up and running in advance of the 30th, and (b) the negotiation of a radical demilitarisation package has been well advanced.

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Dermot Gallagher

31 May 1999

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