

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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Reference Code:	2022/84/43
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RECEIVED 12 FEB 1999

Discussions with Séamus Mallon

1. Séamus Mallon asked me to brief him in London on Tuesday evening, in advance of his meeting with the Prime Minister the following morning. We agreed to meet again after his visit to Downing Street. Mallon was accompanied at No. 10 by Colm Larkin, the principal adviser in his Office.

Prime Minister's frustrations

2. Mallon and Larkin (with the latter largely speaking from notes he had taken at the meeting) said they found the Prime Minister to be very frustrated with the present lack of movement in the process. Blair said he had never before been in a position where people were not seriously interested in negotiating but were arguing, as Sinn Féin and the UUP were doing, that they had reached their bottom lines.

3. In the above regard, Blair was especially irritated with Sinn Féin. He felt that they were not really trying to find a way forward and, if anything, their approach was becoming more negative. This perception was turning public opinion in Britain against them. He also thought it strange that Adams had decided to visit Australia at this crucially sensitive time. Blair went on to say that he found it difficult to understand how, if Sinn Féin were concerned about their security vis-a-vis Republican dissidents at present, the establishment of the Executive was going to resolve their problem. Mallon responded by explaining that all groups, including the dissidents, had to take account of the climate in public opinion - this was most evident post-Omagh when the Real IRA were forced by an outraged public opinion to call a

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ceasefire. He had no doubt but that the establishment of the institutions would have a hugely positive impact in nationalist areas.

4. Both Mallon and Larkin emphasised that the Prime Minister had been very uncritical of David Trimble. Blair said he believed Trimble would do everything possible to get the Executive up and running, and to include Sinn Féin in it; his difficulty however, as we all knew, was with his own party. (In this regard, both Mallon and Bill Jeffrey of the NIO told me separately that Trimble would lose two more of his Assembly party in Monday's vote, with Roy Beggs Junior and Billy Armstrong almost certain to vote against the report of the First and Deputy First Ministers. This would mean that, for the first time, Trimble would be leading a minority of Unionists in the Assembly - 27 to 31, a significant psychological blow to him.)

Thinking on way forward

5. Blair accepted that for the moment Irish officials should be given the opportunity to see how far they could take Sinn Féin on language that John de Chastelain might use. In drawing out the discussion on a possible way forward, Mallon and Larkin had a sense that the "game plan" Blair might have in mind would involve a de Chastelain statement, to be followed by the establishment of the Executive and the other institutions on a time-limited basis. In other words, if Sinn Féin failed to fulfil its obligations on decommissioning within a fixed period after the establishment of the Executive, the British Government would pull the plug on devolution.

6. The British also interestingly spoke in terms of the need for a "short, sharp shock" if a form of words couldn't be constructed for de Chastelain and agreement reached on taking the process forward. Mallon and Larkin

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wondered in this regard if they were considering the stopping of prisoner releases if the impasse continued beyond March.

SDLP attitude on excluding Sinn Féin

7. Finally, Jonathan Powell asked how the SDLP would vote if Trimble tabled a motion in March proposing the exclusion of Sinn Féin from the Executive on the grounds that the party had failed to meet its decommissioning obligations. Mallon made clear, as he has consistently been doing, that this would be in conflict with the Agreement and would, therefore, be strongly opposed by the SDLP. When Powell made the point that, in such circumstances, Trimble would resign, Mallon added that "there will be two of us".

DAG.

Dermot Gallagher
11 February 1999

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