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Meeting with International Commission on Decommissioning Belfast, 1 March 1999

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Secretary Gallagher,

I attended a meeting between Committee A (Security and Political) of the BIIPB with the International Commission on Decommissioning on 1 March 1999. The members of the Committee present were: Deputies Charles Flanagan (Chairman) and Rory O'Hanlon, Senator Joe Costello, Norman Godman MP, Michael Mates MP and Denis Canavan MP.

The Commission were represented by General John de Chastelain and Brigadier Niemenen and their staffers. The meeting lasted about 1½ hours. General de Chastelain outlined the Commission's work and current position, and then answered questions, with some contributions from his colleagues. Most of this was a factual outline of the Commission's origins and work to date. I note below the more interesting points only.

The General feels strongly that all of the parties with whom the Commission were in contact (i.e. everyone except the DUP) wanted peace, the end of violence, and decommissioning. He believes Adams and McGuinness are wedded to the political process, are taking risks, but are unable to produce a decommissioning event at present. He felt that republicans had moved enormously, and believed they wanted to move further, but were unable to do so. In particular, he said the appointment of someone as senior as McGuinness to liaise with the Commission was 'an enormous gesture', and was intended to send a message. Adams' leadership was on the line on this issue. They felt they were trying, and greatly resented being demonised north and south. They recognised Trimble's problems, but felt he should move ahead with the support he can bring with him.

The Commission was receiving full cooperation from the parties, but not from the paramilitaries except for the UVF through Hutchinson [and presumably the LVF], so they could not say they were making progress on decommissioning.

He referred to the 'small but significant' decommissioning event with the LVF in December, which had allowed the Commission to demonstrate its ability to conduct decommissioning. The TV coverage, which was useful for public confidence building, also served to show the paramilitaries that there was no forensic testing of the weapons. The event had caused some strain with the PUP, who regarded the Commission as having gone along with a 'stunt'. De Chastelain's response was that the Commission had no option but to accept weapons whenever offered, even if it was the proverbial 'one bullet'.

He referred to the 'comedy and farce' of the licence issued to Robert Fulton. The second licence, for McClinton, had been of very brief duration. The LVF had asked for it to be extended, saying they could collect more weapons given some more time, but this was refused. The LVF had said there would be a second tranche but this had not yet materialised, perhaps because of Fulton's continuing imprisonment.

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The Commission had no reason to believe any paramilitary group was on the point of decommissioning, nor any reason to believe any group would never decommission. While the IRA had said 'never', they had said the same about a ceasefire, and he chose to believe their hardline statements were meant to quell defections - maintaining cohesion until the political situation developed. It was evident that most of the more sophisticated weaponry was not actually in commission at present - recent events were mostly carried out with handguns and home made explosives.

Asked about reasons why decommissioning was so difficult for the paramilitaries, he said that loyalist groups say they have less arms than the IRA, don't believe the IRA will disarm, and are not willing to start the process. They have not actually said that they would follow an IRA disarming. Sinn Féin said there was a belief that unionists will refuse to share power, and were using decommissioning as a means to deny that. Until that belief was disproved, they couldn't support decommissioning. *De Chastelain felt this seemed to open up some grounds for a compromise.* Something on these lines had been explored in the Autumn, but had failed for lack of any commitment by the IRA. The Commission had asked McGuinness directly whether the IRA would decommission if the institutions were up and running, but had received no answer as yet.

The UDA also been unwilling to move first, and after the UDP's failure in the elections seemed to feel there was no reason to bother. The Commission still felt they were in touch with the UDA via the UDP. De Chastelain diverged to say he hoped some role could be found for UDP leaders, especially McMicheal. The UDP had said their plan was to build up support at Council level, and act as the unofficial opposition outside the Assembly.

On the suggestion that decommissioning was a red herring, that the paramilitaries could always replace their arms, so it was better not to push the issue and instead just let the guns rust, the Commission made a number of points. In their process, the South Africans now regretted not putting more emphasis on taking guns out of society, as they were experiencing a huge surge in violent crime. Decommissioning would be the best possible evidence to the public of a change in mindsets among paramilitaries. In addition, while guns and explosives might be readily replaceable, some of the sophisticated weaponry currently held would be much more difficult to come by now.

It was obvious that 100% decommissioning would never be attainable. If something like 60 - 70% of currently estimated stocks were decommissioned, this would probably satisfy the public.

Role of the Commission in current impasse

De Chastelain spoke carefully about this. Obviously the Commission did not know the solution, any more than anyone else, but they were ready to do what they could to assist.

They are prepared to act as brokers. They can facilitate an event so as to show it as a voluntary act, and not an act of surrender. If the IRA were to say to the Commission that they saw decommissioning starting in certain circumstances, they could pass that on and say that

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they believed it.

In their schemes for decommissioning by the paramilitaries themselves, the Commission had said they would have to be present to verify the destruction of explosives and ammunition. In the circumstances of the current impasse, they could relax this stance somewhat. They could accept a pile of cut-up arms, so long as they could verify that they had been functioning weapons, and how many there had been. They could accept 'a crater in the forest' so long as they had some technical backup in the form of photos, lists of quantities etc., so that they could state positively that an event had taken place.

De Chastelain felt there was some room for manoeuvre in the difference between arms given up and information leading to their discovery and destruction. [I think he was suggesting a kind of hostage scenario, where the Commission could for example be told where a cache of weapons was to be found, so that they came tacitly into the Commission's control, but that they would not actually be collected and destroyed until a later stage, perhaps after other political events.] If the Commission could come up with a compromise that met the requirement for verifiable destruction, they could propose methods that varied from their schemes as set out.

Whether any such compromise was sufficient in the present circumstances was a political matter, and the Commission did not want to be seen to be engaged in politics. This was a very important point for them, and one which Bob McCartney was regularly calling in to them to stress. The Commission had no indication that anything less than actual product could satisfy Trimble's needs.

The Commission believes it has the trust of all sides, but this was a very fragile asset ("We can be honest brokers, if we steer clear of involvement in a fudge....our credibility is uncompromiseable"). They would probably have only one chance to use that trust, and would therefore be very careful in what they said and when they would say it. If they went out on a limb to back a commitment to decommission, and that commitment was reneged on, the Commission would be "finished".

The Commission has therefore been very careful to avoid being seen to take sides. They had asked McGuinness if it would be helpful for the Commission to call on the IRA to make a start - so that they could respond to a call from a neutral body rather than unionists or Governments - and he had replied that that would only cause them to be seen as being on the same side as the unionists. So that was not a pitch that they made publicly.

Stephen Leech

The Committee also had a briefing on security/normalisation from Stephen Leech. He mostly gave them a run down of factual developments. He made the following points/assessments:

The ceasefires were holding, including the INLA. The RIRA ceasefire was holding at organisational level, with some cooperation with the CIRA at operational level. The CIRA was trying to heighten its profile and to expand, especially into Belfast, but was not meeting with great success. PIRA had lost personnel when they agreed to SF entering the Assembly,

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but had not lost many more since then. Punishment beatings were continuing but at a much lower level, especially on the republican side.

The Parades Commission was operating well, and gaining acceptance, except by the Orange Order. This was a problem which needed to be addressed, but by the Order rather than the Commission. Portadown and Drumcree remained very tense. The Government had launched a new initiative with Frank Blair - it was not difficult to envisage a compromise, the problem was in getting there: hence the thinking that an outsider might have more chance. He wouldn't bet on success, however.

On media reports of the PIRA and loyalists gearing up for a return to war, he said there was activity, especially on the republican side, to keep the organisation ticking over and in a state of readiness. There was some training, and also the question of recovering missing weapons. They were not thought to be working up to a return to violence.

On prisoners, two licenced prisoners had been recalled to prison, both for minor offences (fights etc.) not connected with terrorism.

On South Armagh, he said there was a larger RUC presence than before, but still supported by the army. There were mobile patrols. Helicopter transport would hopefully decrease, but this might in fact lead to a greater security force visibility on the roads.

Security downsizing had begun, with about 1,000 prison officers being invited to apply for voluntary redundancy.

Paul Murphy

The Committee met with Paul Murphy, who went briefly over current developments and timetables.

Murphy expressed considerable understanding for the difficulties and concerns on the Sinn Féin side, and awareness of the distance they had already brought their people. He also felt Trimble would not be able to settle for anything less than some actual product.

He hoped Clinton could get involved in Washington, but felt there was a limit to what could be expected in terms of pressuring Sinn Féin - it was more a case of straight talking from an outsider.

De Chastelain would be pivotal in any scheme to solve the impasse, but if the IRA were to be assured that in the event of decommissioning, X,Y and Z would follow, this would probably have to be done by the Governments, rather than the General.

Stephen Dawson
5 March 1999

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