

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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Meeting of Mr John O'Donoghue, Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform, and Mr Adam Ingram, Minister of State at the NIO, with the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning, Dublin, 22 April 1999

Attendance

Irish Side Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform, Secretary General Tim Dalton, Diarmuid Cole, Martin Power, Brendan Callaghan

British Side Minister of State, Stephen Leach, Ian Kerr, Fiona McCoy, Ambassador Ivor Roberts, John Rankin

Commission General John de Chastelain, Brigadier Tauno Nieminen, Ambassador Donald Johnson, Clifford Garrard, Aaro Suonio, Andrew Sens

1. The meeting was held at the request of the Commission, who wished to receive a briefing on the political situation following the Hillsborough Declaration and its implications for the Commission's work. The Commission also regarded the meeting as providing an opportunity for it to report to the two Governments on its work, as provided for in its mandate.

2. General de Chastelain said that since the Hillsborough Declaration the Commission had deferred meeting the political parties in Northern Ireland until it had had an opportunity of hearing the views of the two Governments. If discussions on decommissioning over the next months were going to be less active, the Commission was proposing to reduce their presence to the extent that there would be only one member of the Commission in Ireland at any one time. However, all three members of the Commission would meet here at least once monthly.

3. Welcoming the Commission, the Minister said that both Governments were agreed that there was no question of "parking" the Good Friday Agreement. While it had not proved possible to reach consensus among the parties on the basis of the Hillsborough Declaration, the Governments believed that elements contained in it represented a way forward - it was intended as one means of implementing the Agreement, not an attempted rewrite. It was important that the Commission be seen to continue to be available: the Commission was the best judge of how to arrange that. With regard to demands made of the Commission that it investigate reports that PIRA were rearming, General de Chastelain had responded correctly by saying that it was not the Commission's function to monitor the ceasefire. The Minister said that all the information available to him indicated that the PIRA ceasefire was holding.

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4. The Minister for State thanked the Commission for their ongoing work. He echoed the points made by the Minister about the Hillsborough Declaration, saying that it had been intended as a means of implementing the Good Friday Agreement. Unfortunately, some had been very quick to reject it. They were determined to continue to search for a way forward. He was in favour of the Commission resuming its meetings with the parties. For their part, the Governments were continuing to meet the parties. However, they were moving into a difficult period, with the start of the marching season. He confirmed that since it would be necessary to trigger the d'Hondt mechanism at the next meeting of the Assembly there were currently no plans for it to meet. If there were developments, he suggested that a further meeting between the Governments and the Commission take place. He joined with the Minister in complementing General de Chastelain on his handling of the demand regarding the ceasefire.

5. General de Chastelain said he fully accepted the point about the importance of the Commission being seen to continue to maintain a presence. They intended to make the same arrangements as they had last Summer. Both their offices in Dublin and Belfast would remain open.

6. The Secretary General said that recent meetings between the Governments and the parties had been disappointing, with Sinn Féin taking a hard position. However, it was helpful that Sinn Féin continued to stress that they saw the Commission as providing the means whereby progress could be made. It was not possible at present to predict what would happen next, but there was a strong determination to keep the Good Friday Agreement alive - implementation of the Agreement was the way forward.

7. General de Chastelain said that he regarded the concept of putting arms beyond use as equivalent to decommissioning as defined in the legislation. When the Commission had said as much to Sinn Féin (around the time of the Hillsborough Declaration) they had seemed open to the idea. However, subsequently - presumably following consultations with their grassroots - their attitude had hardened. The Commission had suggested various options to Sinn Féin whereby progress on the issue could be made, but Sinn Féin continued to insist that the fact that the IRA's guns were out of use represented progress and that the Commission should make a statement to that effect. Ambassador Johnson said that by his reckoning 18 options had been put to Sinn Féin from various sources. General de Chastelain said that in his view Sinn Fein wanted to move to decommissioning and that the leadership was not being obstructive. However, they did not seem to be able to persuade PIRA to move. He referred to a recent statement by the UVF that even if PIRA started to decommission they (the UVF) would not do so and to pressure on the Commission to bring about the release of Mark Fulton of the LVF from prison. The Minister of State said that the UVF attitude was at least partly due to a fear of fragmentation occurring among republicans if PIRA started to decommission. He noted that the Fulton case was subject to a judicial process. In response to a question from Ambassador Roberts, General de Chastelain said that Sinn Féin had shown no willingness to make a distinction between weapons and explosives.

8. The Minister said that they had appealed to Sinn Féin to come forward with ideas, but were still awaiting a response. Both the Sinn Féin and the UUP leadership had a duty

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to bring their membership along with them. He was confident that in time progress would be made. Mr Leach suggested that the Commission, in discussions with Sinn Féin, might remind them of suggestions they had made in their submission to the International Body on how to ensure that decommissioning would not be seen as surrender.

9. Ambassador Johnson referred to the lack of progress with Sinn Féin in discussions on decommissioning. The Secretary General said that from Sinn Féin's point of view decommissioning was only one of a number of issues which had to be resolved. A very important issue for them, for example, was policing and the outcome of the Patten Commission. General de Chastelain said that the Commission by its nature could see the situation from only one aspect, that of decommissioning. The Minister of State said that Trimble had very little leeway in making concessions. The Minister said that it was important that PIRA did not split over the issue of decommissioning. As long as people were not being killed, the public would not become disillusioned with the process. Sinn Féin had always recognised that there was an obligation ultimately to decommission. The Minister of State said that a significant schism would be a serious development. The Secretary General said that the reality was that it took only a small number of people to cause havoc. The Sinn Féin leadership were aware of this and were working to bring people along with the process. What was most important was to win as many people as possible over to democracy: the best project to achieve this was the Good Friday Agreement. Winning everybody over to exclusively democratic methods took time; the immediate task for the Commission was to try to make further progress on decommissioning. General de Chastelain said that public opinion would have a strong impact on how republicans operated.

B Callaghan

cc. Secretary General, Mr Teahon, Mr Gallagher, Dr Mansergh, Mr Cole, Mr Power

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