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Meeting with Independent International Commission on Decommissioning

Belfast, 26 May 1999

1. The two Governments, at official level, met the International Commission at their invitation in Belfast yesterday. The British side consisted of Bill Jeffrey and Stephen Leach, while Tim Dalton and Dermot Gallagher made up the Irish team.

2. John de Chastelain, the Chairman of the Commission, opened the meeting by saying that the British Prime Minister had met the Commission yesterday and had asked them to intensify their work with a view to submitting a report to the two Governments before the 30th June. Arising from this meeting, de Chastelain felt that the focus of their report would have to be on the work done during the timeframe between d'Hondt and the 30 June date, and would have to be based on moves towards actual decommissioning. It was effectively "put or shut up time" for the Commission.

3. Ambassador Johnson, in an adversarial intervention that showed little appreciation for or sensitivity towards the wider context, said he would have to say, if asked, that Sinn Féin were not working constructively and in good faith to meet their obligations under the Agreement. After 9 months, the talks had produced zero. Sinn Féin would have to be judged more harshly on day 370, than on day 3 or day 37. The same was true for the PUP and the UDP.

4. In further discussion, it emerged that the Chairman and his colleagues were envisaging, following the meeting with the Prime Minister, that the

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Commission would issue a statement within the next few days. This, de Chastelain said, "would report on the facts". The "hypothetical scenario" which he advanced would have the Commission state that the two Governments had asked for a written report before the 30th June (i.e. after d'Hondt had been triggered but before devolution had taken place), that there was a commitment to meet the deadline of May 2000 on decommissioning and, as part of this, to accept a schedule for decommissioning.

5. At this stage, Ambassador Johnson intervened strongly to state that three questions would have to be addressed in their statement: (a) was there going to be decommissioning by May 2000; (b) if so, what was the schedule or timetable for this; and (c) what were the modalities? This was the standard by which the good faith of the parties would be measured. He went on (somewhat emotionally) to emphasise that it would be necessary for the Commission to make such a statement this week to demonstrate their independence, to enable the UUP to run d'Hondt, and to allow the parties time to answer the hard questions which needed to be put to them.

6. In response, the Irish side expressed serious concern at the direction of some of the discussion, especially the approach being suggested by Ambassador Johnson. We had, of course, no objection to hard questions being put in private, and it was indeed very important that the parties with influence be put under the maximum pressure in this way. However, hard questioning was very different from issuing a statement which would predict or signal in advance what was in the Commission's report; such a move would be fraught with danger and could undermine the common objective of achieving an agreed overall solution. If a statement was felt necessary at this time, it would be better if it came from the two Governments, and was along the (non-judgemental) lines of the Downing Street draft. As regards the Johnson

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idea that a statement would help Trimble to run d'Hondt, Mr. Dalton said that this should be primarily a matter for the two Governments (i.e. the Commission might best concentrate on its decommissioning mandate!).

7. The Irish side finally made the point that, as we moved towards the 30th June, we needed a structure or process by which the initiatives and efforts of all sides could be choreographed and mutually underpinned. We were urgently reflecting on this in Dublin, following which we would discuss it with our British colleagues.

8. The British side, while understandably somewhat reticent given the meeting between the Prime Minister and the Commission on the previous day (on which they had not at that time been fully briefed), seemed in general terms to share our thinking on the above.

9. In conclusion, John de Chastelain said he agreed fully that the Commission should not do anything which would exacerbate the situation. He would, however, welcome the views of the two Governments in the near future on how they wished the Commission to take matters forward. Overall however (and this was confirmed by a private phone call later in the day to Tim Dalton), we had the clear sense that he was very embarrassed by the approach of his American colleague, and that our approach and advice may have succeeded in weaning him off the idea of a Commission statement at this time, and certainly in the terms initially envisaged.

DAG.

Dermot Gallagher
27 May 1999

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