

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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Reference Code:	2023/154/27
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Secret

Meeting with Secretary of State, Iveagh House, 21 March 2000

Summary Report

1. The Minister for Foreign Affairs, accompanied by the Minister of State and officials (Dermot Gallagher, Ray Bassett and Rory Montgomery) met the Secretary of State, who was accompanied by Ivor Roberts, Jonathan Stephens, Nick Perry and Tom Kelly, for approximately fifty minutes.

Current Positions of UUP and Sinn Féin

2. The Secretary of State said that in his view the republican leadership, while undoubtedly in a difficult position, was somewhat more secure and had potentially more negotiating flexibility than it claimed. He believed that there was a certain willingness to deal.

3. Undoubtedly Trimble's Washington remarks had raised doubts within the UUP. However, the greater short-term danger came from David Burnside's UUC motion tying restoration of the Executive to the title of the RUC. While the Secretary of State took our side's point that much the best outcome would be for Trimble to put up a less binding composite alternative, he indicated that Trimble's initial sense was that this would be difficult. He might simply have to let it past, shrug his shoulders, and be prepared to return to the Council later if a breakthrough were achieved on the arms issue. The Minister thought this was politically very dangerous and would undoubtedly create a fresh complication.

4. The Secretary of State said that, if the Burnside motion did pass, he would make clear that the British Government would not resile from its position on Patten.

Outline of a Possible Deal

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5. The Secretary of State thought that Trimble had signalled a willingness to accept a "Mitchell mark 2": a restoration of the institutions without guns up front or even a firm early date for product, but on the basis of clarity as to IRA intentions. In his view the four staples of an IRA statement needed to be (a) an unambiguous commitment to peaceful means (b) a commitment to decommission by a given date, in the context of full implementation of the Agreement (c) a commitment to sustain the ceasefires in all circumstances, on pain of Sinn Féin exclusion from the Executive and (d) immediate re-engagement with de Chastelain.

6. The Minister, in reply to a specific question about whether the SDLP would be prepared to undertake to exclude Sinn Féin in the event of an IRA return to violence, made clear his view that it would be counterproductive to hypothesise about negative situations. More generally, he reiterated throughout the meeting the need for the two Governments to come to a clear common view on what the full implementation of the Agreement would mean in practice. The IRA could then reasonably be asked to make quite clear what they would do to put weapons beyond use so as to ensure maximum public confidence. He drew attention to last week's Irish Times article by Gerry Kelly, which, amidst much that was predictably negative, had suggested that the Agreement itself offered a framework to address the causes and consequences of conflict.

7. Stephens said that in his view the UUP would require some kind of early gesture on arms, even if short of actual decommissioning. Otherwise they would be asked to accept a promise that something would be done many months down the road, at the end of a sequence of steps all of which they would find quite unpalatable. The Minister emphasised that a clear statement from the IRA, along the lines we had in mind, would be a major advance on

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the Agreement itself and something Trimble could sell very strongly to his party. He firmly believed that there was no prospect of an early IRA gesture, however much we would wish for one.

Working Group on Full Implementation/Process over coming weeks

8. The Minister, noting the agreement in Washington to establish a group of officials to work on fleshing out what full implementation would mean, emphasised that the purpose of the exercise had to be to describe what the situation would be if the threat were gone. Clarity was required on both sides of the equation. The Governments in particular needed to be bold.

9. The Secretary of State thought officials could meet this week for an initial exchange. But he stressed that he would resist showing any developed ideas to Sinn Féin before the IRA had indicated its broad intentions. Stephens added that the British fear was that they would construct a package on the basis of false assumptions about the IRA. The Minister agreed that in the first instance what was required was for the two Governments to establish a common position. If the IRA failed to come up with a clear position of its own, there would be no deal.

10. Gallagher emphasised that discussions in the group had to go beyond the normal routine exchanges on security matters. The approach needed to be politically-driven. The Secretary of State argued that expectations should not be exaggerated. Even if the IRA said all that was hoped, there would still be a threat from the dissidents.

11. It was agreed that the Taoiseach and Prime Minister could look further at these issues at Lisbon.

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Role of Smaller Parties

12. The Secretary of State felt that some way - perhaps a series of meetings involving the Minister of State and Minister Howarth - had to be found to address the desire of the smaller parties to be involved: if frustrated they had a certain capacity to "poison the wells".

North/South Bodies

13. The Secretary of State thought that we should "tread water" on the Bodies until Easter, permitting them to continue operation but doing nothing high-profile to cause difficulty for the UUP. The Minister noted that we had been willing to meet the UUP's difficulties on Board meetings. The position on the transfer of functions to Waterways Ireland on 1 April was explained to the Secretary of State, who had expressed some concern.

Rory Montgomery
21 March 2000

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