

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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Secretary - General
Copy for information. You will wish to see the propositions put forward by Séamus Mallon and the Taoiseach's reactions - pages 5-6

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Report of Taoiseach's Meeting with the SDLP, Government Buildings, Dublin, 15 February, 2000.

The meeting had been arranged to provide an opportunity for consultation ahead of the meetings arranged for No. 10 Downing Street the following day, designed as part of an effort, promoted by the Taoiseach, to have the Northern Ireland institutions suspended by Secretary of State Mandelson speedily restored. However, two hours before the time fixed for the meeting (7 p.m.) the IRA had issued a statement that it was withdrawing its interlocutor with the de Chastelain Commission and taking off the table all the propositions it had put on the table since November, 1999. Before coming to the meeting, Mr. Seamus Mallon had given a very angry interview outside Government Buildings, indicating his anger and impatience at Sinn Féin/the IRA and the UUP and hinting strongly at impatience with the two Governments for indulging obstructive prima donna behaviour by these two groups. At the meeting, he left the discussion develop considerably before coming in with the same analysis.

Representing the SDLP at the meeting were John Hume, Party Leader, Séamus Mallon, Deputy Party Leader, Bríd Rogers, Sean Farren and Mark Durkan. With the Taoiseach were the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr. Brian Cowen, T.D., Mr. Dermot Gallagher, Second Secretary, Department of Foreign Affairs, Dr. Martin Mansergh, Special Adviser to the Taoiseach and the undersigned. The meeting was continued over supper. This report is set out in direct speech but does not purport to be verbatim or exhaustive.

Taoiseach

We have had lots of contact over the past week but it may be useful, in the interests of full information, to run over the ground. I have been saying to the British since last Friday - the only way we will get out of the hole in which we are stuck is by speedy restoration of the institutions. We must not lose momentum or slip into a vacuum. I have had no contact with Sinn Féin, except for one phone call from Adams last Sunday.

In all my contacts with Blair, what is coming across is that he is prepared to do something quickly but he needs clarity from the republicans. What happened last Friday was that when Blair phoned Adams to tell him suspension was going ahead, Adams got McGuinness to tell de Chastelain that he could now use the words that had been relayed to him earlier but subject to restrictive conditions on their use. That is the truth of the matter. The words remain there - once put forward, they cannot really be withdrawn but they are not good enough. We now have to get back to the position where de Chastelain can pick the words up ... If we don't get the institutions back fast, things will start to unravel quickly.

John Hume

What is happening in London tomorrow? Is it a roundtable meeting?

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Taoiseach

No, it's not. Blair has allocated 3.5 hours for the matter. He is to meet me, then we jointly are to meet each of the parties, in turn. There is a bit of doubt as to whether Mandelson will be involved.

We - Blair and I - had been talking about getting the institutions back within a week. My speech in the Dáil was intended to support and promote that approach but it was blown off course by the IRA statement. David Trimble is going to Missouri in the U.S. on Thursday.

Sean Farren

Is not the prospect of having things up and running again by the end of the week unrealistic now that the IRA have taken all their offers off the table?

Taoiseach

De Chastelain will say he is back to where he was pre-review. I presume that the IRA are acting tactically, in taking it off the table. As hard as we tried since Derry 2 weeks ago, it was only at 4.30 a.m. on Friday morning that our guys got a document that was useful.

Sean Farren

What did they intend by withdrawing the interlocutor? They keep saying decommissioning is a voluntary act but the lesson of experience is that only pressure seems to work. So, they can't have it both ways. What is the ultimate sanction to which they can be exposed? Is there one? Can progress be held to ransom by people who disclaim responsibility?

Taoiseach

Our guys were sitting on them for 13 days. All they got was the interim IRA statement, until the 4.30 a.m. document. Mandelson did see this document last Friday as progress, maybe more than I did. Now it has been taken off the table. We are back to the old double veto - the Unionists and the IRA. Yesterday, I was trying strongly with Blair to get the institutions back by Monday next. I am prepared to listen to any new ideas there are, including about sanctions.

D. Gallagher

The important thing to hold onto is that De Chastelain thinks it is significant and is a basis for the fulfilment of his Commission's mandate. For the first time, the IRA barked. They did not want the institutions to fall. They may have seen they had to make a move to prevent this....

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Sean Farren

Has De Chastelain had a more active role in convincing the parties that there has been significant progress? Can he?

D. Gallagher

All of us must build him up.

Taoiseach

I heard Séamus giving interviews on Monday, you were supplying answers, even knowing what was not in the offer, it was far more substantial than where we were 13 days earlier.

There are many small things that can be done, to help move things along. I am convinced that the only way to get decommissioning - is if they decide to wrap up the organisation.

Sean Farren

Why did they engage in brinkmanship? How can we know that they don't want to lose the institutions? What was their ultimate intent?

D. Gallagher

I think they want to do it but to delay it. Their great fear is of a split. The Taoiseach and Minister put great pressure on them over the past 13 days.

John Hume

Is their statement that the guns are silent still there?

Taoiseach

Yes. That stays. Tactically, their moves tend to be at the last minute. If they had given it one day earlier and freedom to use it-up to the end it was supposed to be confidential to Blair and me.

John Hume

What did they say to De Chastelain?

D. Gallagher

That in the context of full implementation of the Agreement - Patten, the Criminal Justice Review etc. - and the removal of the causes of conflict, they would be prepared to put arms beyond use. And the British legislation would have to be withdrawn.

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At first, this information was supposed to be given to the two Governments only, then they were persuaded that the interlocutor should convey that message to De Chastelain.

John Hume

Have you received any message from Sinn Féin to explain why the interlocutor is now withdrawn?

Taoiseach

No.

D. Gallagher

They seek to maximise their leverage.

Minister for Foreign Affairs

Ahead of, and for tomorrow's meetings. Withdrawal, however, spoils the chances of making progress.

There is a lot of animosity to Mandelson on their part - it is getting very personal.

I felt, when I met David Trimble yesterday, that he was acting like a person who felt himself in a stronger position than before. He saw the possibility of using the De Chastelain report as a basis for progress. This morning he was saying that De Chastelain is a military man and therefore what he says should not be minimised. He was saying to his own Ulster Unionists : don't minimise it.

I think he would take an offer but it would have to be more than was on offer last Friday. I got the feeling that the Unionists are not setting the bar as high as they publicly claim. The withdrawal by the IRA is deeply disappointing.

Séamus Mallon

I went to Mandelson, I spent 3 weeks, showing him the options, showing him what would happen if he went ahead with suspension. What I said would happen, has now happened. We look as if we could spend the whole evening analysing the positions of others. We need to consider our own positions.

I'll speak first as a member of the Irish nation. It is humiliating for me to see the Irish Government humiliated, treated like this. It is also humiliating to me as a politician, in the party with the largest percentage vote in the Assembly, to be treated as we have been for the past two years. I don't want to rake over old coals.

But we have a situation where the unionists and republicans blew out the institutions of the Agreement. The Irish Government gave David Trimble a P.R. opportunity at

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Government Buildings and similarly with Sinn Féin. It is hurtful to us to have to sit on the margins, as we had to do at Hillsborough, at Castle Buildings, in the review and now again. It is humiliating to be told only what the Irish and British Governments will tell us, on issues in which we are directly involved.

It has got to the point where we are all looking foolish, as if we had no authority or mandate, where we are all being played upon by David Trimble and by the republicans. It seems that the more you obstruct things, the more you are pampered - here, in No. 10, in the White House and so on.

I don't leave David Trimble out of the blame.

I don't like Mandelson as a person but at least he had the 'balls' to take the decision.

I can see what all this is doing. It is debilitating our party. We can't let ourselves be dogs bodies. I know that I will be asked presently for an alternative and I will give one. I am absolutely convinced that the time has come for the two Governments to draw a line of demarcation, to say they will take no more and that there will be no more negotiation on a daily basis with people who then stick fingers in your eyes.

We should give them, jointly a notion of time within which we want answers. We should do this with Trimble and with Adams. If they don't come up with the answers, then the logic is that the political aspects of the agreement won't work.

There will then be two alternatives. Either our party cosying up to the unionists. We have said "no" to that.

The other alternative that faces us and that we must make them face up to, is where the BIIGC becomes the sole repository of political input. I know the consequences and the difficulties of that, but we can't go on and see our party and your Government - a good Government on these issues - being humiliated. There is a right of sovereignty of the Irish people. We have the right not again to go into months or years of pleading with the Ulster unionists or Sinn Féin on our future.

I know that I'll hear at the end of this meeting - another few days and we'll have it - but in reality it will be like Dev's mercury.

We have to draw a line or the quagmire will be even bigger.

Taoiseach

As regards the position of your party, we have tried to safeguard and advance it. For tomorrow, Blair originally wanted only the Ulster Unionists, then he went on to include Sinn Féin and we took the position that the SDLP must also be involved.

It does me no good to have nights like last Thursday, where 3 senior Irish officials are hanging around, waiting for a response.

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We purposely started pushing, when I was in South Africa and we kept up pressure, in this recent phase, for 13 days.

D. Gallagher

As somebody who has often travelled to Derry and Markethill, I took responsibility for ensuring the SDLP would be included in tomorrow's round of meetings.

Séamus Mallon

It is still going to be tagged on when the others are over.

D. Gallagher

This meeting we are having now was the priority for us.

Taoiseach

We shall have to work jointly to keep the communications tight. I take all of Séamus's points. You are saying to us that we have to call it and set a date.

Séamus Mallon

Call it, I know the problem around setting dates. But we are suffering. I told Mandelson : "watch this pendulum swing". I am going to make a strong point to Blair tomorrow that on 14 July I said to him suspend the Assembly and have a review and at that time he said it could not be done, it would damage the Agreement but now, last Friday, to bolster David Trimble, the whole thing is suspended.

Bríd Rodgers

It seems clear that they (the republicans) do respond to pressure, from the Irish Government, from the US. What they were unable to do on 31 January, they were able to do some days later.

They keep changing their excuse. First, it was that the Unionists "did not want a Fenian about the place". That is gone now. They have moved on to the "surrender" argument now. It is time that they are pressurised.

John Hume

It is hard to see what way to go. The two Governments should keep closely together, take charge and keep going with all the other aspects of the Agreement - Patten etc. Then, against that background, try to get it back. Is there any intelligence about the reasons for this evening's decisions? Is it political bargaining or are fundamentalists taking over?

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Minister for Foreign Affairs

Mandelson sees himself as the big man, a the one calling the shots.

John Hume

When we met him, I was making the argument that the people, North and South, had endorsed the Agreement and he lost his temper with me in an extraordinary way.

Minister for Foreign Affairs

I asked him what was his game plan. He seemed to be well in with David Trimble. He said : "I am doing what I said to David Trimble in January, I would do. The Shinners respond to pressure. What they have come up with is not enough. When we get what we assess is the max they will give, then I'll cash in my chips with David Trimble and get him to accept what is available at that stage". That is more or less his approach.

Séamus Mallon

He has a Punch magazine view of the Irish problem.

Mark Durkan

He is clearly one of the problems we are facing. If we are going to get the institutions back, what we need is the best aggregate of the different elements that were there last Friday.

Taoiseach

That is the right way to look at it.

Mark Durkan

It was not unpredictable that the IRA would say : we gave the interlocutor as the price for getting the institutions up and running, so, with the institutions gone, they'd take the interlocutor away. The worst thing is the withdrawal of all they had put on the table.

People are being encouraged to see De Chastelain. We are all saying we should put the weight on him. But republicans are not going to negotiate with De Chastelain.

Taoiseach

They gave the proposals to him formally.

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Mark Durkan

Yes, but the provenance of the proposals was different. The Irish Government should make it clear to them that it is with De Chastelain the armed groups have to work.

John Hume

Is there a risk that De Chastelain will pull out?

Séamus Mallon

De Chastelain is only a clearing house. How could De Chastelain negotiate demilitarisation? It is not in his remit.

Mark Durkan

Demilitarisation should be run separately and should have been done all along.

Séamus Mallon

I agree with Mark but who negotiates?

Taoiseach

De Chastelain has not been negotiating. The interlocutor only goes in to announce what has been negotiated elsewhere. The republicans will pose the question why give in your chips to him, when he has nothing he can offer in return.

John Hume

What is the strategy for and from tomorrow?

Taoiseach

I am attracted to Séamus Mallon's idea of moving fast to the end-game. We need to get on with it. Otherwise, the marching season will come on us and also people will start talking and worrying about elections. Tomorrow we should be saying - keep any process now short and sweet.

Séamus Mallon

What is the pill for them? There has to be one for both - unionists and republicans. To Sinn Féin, it is necessary to say : you have messed us about, so.... To the unionists, you have to say that the alternative is government through the BIIGC. Unless, those two pills are set down in front of them, things will drag out.

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John Hume

I worry that the Unionists will try to renegotiate the Good Friday Agreement.

Taoiseach

At least Mandelson took a strong line on that when he spoke to the BIIPB on Monday.

Séamus Mallon

They decided things should be suspended. Now, I am being asked is it o.k. for David Lavery to be kept on. I said "no, you are the suspenders, suspension must be suspension".

Minister for Foreign Affairs

The Taoiseach has got a good relationship with Blair. Blair has got to confront his own man. He (the latter) was going ahead of himself. He has the attitude - "Tony is leaving everything to me".

Mark Durkan

We are all agreed we want to do "it" quickly. But what is the "it"? Whatever it is, it needs to be anchored by the two Governments working together. There have been different emphases and different foci of contact over the past two weeks. But now, the two Governments must pull together.

The form of the talks process now is important. The form will do more to settle the landscape than.....

Taoiseach

We will work on this tomorrow.

Mark Durkan

If it's just a deadline, the outcome will be the same as over the past two weeks.

Séamus Mallon

Put yourself in the position of David Trimble or of Sinn Féin. What is there there now that makes them think they won't get away with being obstructive again and again?

Taoiseach

Sinn Féin did not expect suspension to happen.

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Séamus Mallon

But what is to pressurise David Trimble? He will go to the US, ponce back, be cosseted by you, the British, get the jet laid on for him. That is the logic of jumping in response to his threat of resignation. There are other options. (In answer to an interjection) It would not be Donaldson - he is not in the Assembly.

John Hume

Has David Trimble a strategy we don't recognise?

Taoiseach

I asked him last Thursday what was his approach. He said that "Sinn Féin will jump up and down for a month, then there will be a review for 2 months, then it will take another month for us to get back". When I pointed out that that would bring you right up to Drumcree, he did not seem to have thought of that!

Dr. Mansergh

I am currently reading the biography of Trimble by Henry Patterson. On what I read there, I reckon he feels very pleased with himself at present.

Taoiseach

He still believes that in elections down the road, the UUP and SDLP will get a big majority and run the Executive themselves.

The meeting adjourned for supper at that point. The Taoiseach had to leave early to attend another meeting.

Walter Kirwan,
Assistant Secretary,
Northern Ireland Division,
Department of the Taoiseach.

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