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Meetings between Governments and Parties, Belfast, 8 March 2000

The Minister for Foreign Affairs (accompanied by the Minister of State and officials) and Secretary of State Mandelson jointly met with the pro-Agreement parties in Castle Buildings, Belfast on Wednesday 8 March. The purpose of the meetings was to initiate a series of consultations with the parties. The Governments were largely in listening mode and did not try to be prescriptive. The SDLP and the smaller parties had been worried by what they perceived as a sense of drift in the process, and warmly welcomed the series of meetings. The SDLP in particular had been anxious that a Round Table meeting, involving all the pro-Agreement parties, should be convened.

The Minister had met separately with the SDLP (report attached) and with the Secretary of State and Jim Steinberg, the US Deputy National Security Adviser, on the previous evening.

The meetings were conducted in a realistic and candid atmosphere. The most difficult were those with the Ulster Unionists and Sinn Féin.

The running order of the meetings was as follows: NIWC; SDLP; UUP; PUP; Alliance; UDP; Sinn Féin and a round-table involving all the parties.

1. NIWC

The party delegation included its two Assembly members, Monica McWilliams and Jane Morrice. They stressed the need for an inclusive process and said that the resolution of the present difficulties should not be the exclusive preserve of the UUP and Sinn Féin. The Women's Coalition also commented very favourably on how well the Assembly was working and mentioned that they had, on occasions, made common cause with the DUP and Sinn Féin against the UUP and the SDLP. They also raised

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- their proposal for an-all party implementation committee to oversee the implementation of any agreement reached in the current round of discussions;

- their view that decommissioning as presently defined was unattainable in the short or medium term.

- the need to involve "civic society" more in the political process.

2. SDLP

The SDLP group comprised John Hume, Séamus Mallon, Mark Durkan, Seán Farren and Bríd Rodgers.

Farren reported that a recent bilateral meeting with the UUP (McGimpsey and Danny Kennedy) had been useful. There was a lack of emphasis on product (especially from McGimpsey); they had seemed interested in finding other ways of guaranteeing the removal of the threat symbolised by arms.

The Secretary of State acknowledged the deficiencies of the model on the basis of which we had been working, in which decommissioning and devolution were counterposed. But he felt that even if a longer-term perspective were to be adopted, there would still be a need for some kind of backstop or guarantee. This led to a lengthy exchange with Mallon, who argued (a) that, in an alternative scenario, all commitments, including dates, would need to be nailed down and (b) that it had to be clear what sanction there would be in the event of a failure to deliver, and all would have to agree this in advance (it seemed clear that he was principally concerned to prevent pressure coming on the SDLP alone in the event of an IRA failure to honour a promise down the line). Bill Jeffrey suggested that the UUP would say that the onus in such a scenario would indeed lie on the SDLP - a suggestion strongly rejected by Mallon.

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The Minister cautioned against repeating the errors of the past and placing undue emphasis on a failsafe: anything which appeared to republicans as an externally-imposed deadline was likely to be counterproductive. What was important was to get from the IRA a clear sense of how it would act in the context of the full implementation of the Agreement.

Rodgers, supported by Farren, said that there would need to be a very clear understanding of what "full implementation" meant. There would also need to be assurances from the British Government that the institutions would not again be suspended unilaterally.

Durkan argued strongly that more use could be made of de Chastelain in future. This was contested by the Secretary of State, who described him as a "mailbox" or "a piece of machinery"; he had no leverage with the IRA and was thus unable to negotiate with it. Mallon evidently agreed with this assessment.

In summing up, the Secretary of State said that, if the new strategy we were considering was to work, he felt there were two key questions to be answered before he could even start selling it to the UUP: what face-saver could be offered to unionists for moving off decommissioning, and what would the back-stop be.

3. UUP

Representing the UUP were David Trimble, Ken Maginnis, Michael McGimpsey and David Campbell.

The Secretary of State asked (in terms similar to those used subsequently in his IMI speech) whether the decommissioning/devolution trade-off had in fact served us well. Were there other ways of achieving the objectives we shared?

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Trimble did not answer the question. After briefly saying that a process of some kind was essential, he proceeded to attack the Government for "breaking its word" on the suspension issue. There would never have been devolution were it not for the assurances given by the two Governments that all the institutions would be suspended if decommissioning did not take place. He went on to object specifically to a proposed meeting of the Food Safety Body's board, despite the objections of the UUP chairman, Bertie Kerr [the meeting in fact has been postponed].

The Secretary of State said that his understanding was that the Bodies were "ticking over" and not developing: the hope on all sides was that the suspension would be brief.

Maginnis endorsed what Trimble had said. He challenged the Government to act as the true leader of Irish republicanism. Trimble accused us of "running after Sinn Féin." The Minister made clear the Government's firm commitment to ensuring that decommissioning was dealt with in the context of the full implementation of the Agreement. What we had to devise was a process which actually delivered what was sought. He pointed to his Ard Fheis speech as evidence of his willingness to criticise Sinn Féin when required, and noted that Trimble himself had praised the Government's efforts to persuade republicans to offer more.

The Secretary of State sought to shift the discussion back to the way forward. He pointed out (in response to Maginnis's claim that the absence of an Army Convention showed a lack of serious intent on the IRA's part) that the IRA had acknowledged to de Chastelain that an internal process was required to deal with the arms issue. He also said that he assumed that the IRA reference to the causes of conflict had to do with the full implementation of the Agreement.

In response, Trimble said that even this more benign assumption was alarming in that

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it implied that "everything else" was a pre-condition to decommissioning. But all along we had made working assumptions favourable to the IRA which had turned out to be incorrect. There had to be "clarity and something on the downside". However, this was not followed up, as he and Maginnis both moved on to suggest that the evidence was that the republican leadership was under threat from hardliners: Brendan Hughes was close to Keenan. This would restrict the capacity of Adams and McGuinness to move. The Secretary of State commented that the same things could be said about Trimble's position: we had to deal with the leaders in place.

4. PUP

The meeting with the PUP was, as usual, very candid. The PUP brought a large delegation but all the talking was done by its two Assembly members, David Ervine and Billy Hutchinson. They emphasised the need for the two Governments to take over management of the process and insisted on their own participation in the process. They wanted to avoid the process becoming the "David and Gerry" show.

Some of the other points made by the PUP were:

- their belief that they did not sign up to decommissioning in the Good Friday Agreement, and were only committed to using their influence to achieve it. Actual weapon handovers were not involved. The PUP is much more interested in the absence of the will to use weapons than in decommissioning.

- Sinn Féin has never been tested on the issue of arms since the UUP has continually blocked the full implementation of the Agreement. The Provos always have an excuse for not dealing seriously with the issue of arms.

- Hutchinson stated that weapons are not the issue at the heart of the present impasse but trust. It is possible to replenish any handed-over weapons very

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easily. He mentioned that weapons could be now obtained through the internet. Unionists needed to redefine decommissioning to get themselves out of the present mess.

- The PUP do not accept that David Trimble could never sell a deal short of actual product. Ervine stated that "leaders are there to lead". He claimed that the UUP had used decommissioning to sell devolution to its electorate but now it had become a block on devolution. It was time to change.

- The Republican movement should be persuaded to announce publicly that "the mantle of Irish Republicanism was passing from the IRA to Sinn Féin". This would effectively mean that politics was taking over from armed conflict.

5. Alliance

The Alliance party have been pressing for a resumption of political talks and naturally welcomed the opportunity to meet with the two Governments (they met the Minister for Foreign Affairs in Dublin on 6 March).. The delegation was led by party leader Seán Neeson and included deputy leader, Séamus Close and Assembly member Eileen Bell. As with the other smaller parties, the Alliance delegation stressed the need for a collective approach to the current problems. They made the following points

- the party has just released a six point plan and has been meeting with the other parties to discuss it. Neeson said that the first step was for all the pro-Agreement parties to rededicate themselves to the Agreement.

- there was a need to redefine what was meant by decommissioning

- Close said that he had attended a funeral in Bessbrook where the noise of military helicopters had intruded heavily on the service. He himself was

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angered by the helicopters and he wondered why greater demilitarisation had not occured in South Armagh.

- Close also questioned why the dissident groups on all sides had not been subject to greater RUC and Garda action. The Minister replied that considerable efforts had been devoted to keeping these groups under surveillance.

6. UDP

The UDP was represented by Gary McMichael and Davy Adams, together with a note-taker.

The main points made were:

- the UDP wants to see the institutions restored, but there is little faith in the process: the Irish Government is blamed for taking the pressure off republicans by exaggerating the significance of what was a last-minute tactical move by the IRA;

- the fact that the loyalist organisations had maintained their interlocutors with de Chastelain had not been sufficiently appreciated;

- after the Mitchell Review, the UDA/UFF had virtually split on whether to appoint a representative to de Chastelain: the UDP had had huge difficulty in persuading people that the Mitchell deal was genuine, and their credibility had suffered when it had been shown not to be.

- from now on, there had to be absolute clarity. The UDP saw decommissioning as a "natural and evolutionary" part of the process, but recognised that it had

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become a key issue in itself and needed to be addressed by more than words. There needed to be an indication from republicans of when they thought decommissioning would begin after the re-establishment of the institutions. There was a need to build confidence in republican intentions: even liberal unionists were now doubting their own judgement.

7. Sinn Féin

The Sinn Féin delegation of five included party leader, Gerry Adams, as well as Martin McGuinness, Bairbre de Brún, Mitchell McLoughlin and Dessie Macken. The delegation was in very combative mood especially towards the Secretary of State whom they accused of breaking the Agreement. The Secretary of State at times found it difficult to cope with the Sinn Féin pressure and there were some personal exchanges between himself and Adams but the meeting ended on a relatively even keel.

The following were the main points made by the delegation:

- Republican confidence in the political process had been badly shaken by the British Government's unilateral suspension of the institutions. The poison of decommissioning had been introduced into the system by Blair's side letter to Trimble at the end of the Good Friday negotiations. The problem was not one of decommissioning but of resistance to change.

- Republicans had expected more of this British Labour Government but now it was reverting back to the old ways of the Tories. The British Government needs to be the engine of change rather than blocking it.

- Sinn Féin wanted the institutions restored immediately. If the Unionists will not play ball then this must be acknowledged but only the internal Northern

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part could be stalled. Implement everything else and the Unionists will want to rejoin the process in order to exercise an influence on events.

- Martin McGuinness in a forceful intervention said that doubts were being raised about British Government intentions across a range of issues including the implementation of the Patten recommendation, the Criminal Justice Review and other issues. He demanded to know if the British Government had a plan to restore the Good Friday Agreement which they had unilaterally torn up.

- When the Secretary of State raised the need for unionist confidence in any restoration, Adams replied that the unionists were only behaving as they always behaved but now the British Government were shoring them up. The issue of decommissioning could have been solved on a number of previous occasions if there had been the political will to do so. He said that he would never agree to a deal with David Trimble unless it was written down in black and white and they shook hands on it. He would never again agree to a "nod and a wink" arrangement.

- In response to a question on demilitarisation, Adams replied that the issue of normalisation had been settled in the Good Friday Agreement. His party were not going to renegotiate it. The British Government should immediately move on a range of issues including the Finucane case in order to restore confidence.

- Martin McGuinness said that the political and military situation on the ground was sliding badly and Republican dissidents were organising. It only needed a small number of men to keep the British army tied down in Northern Ireland for many years and there was a desperate need to ensure that the dissidents did not get the opportunity to exploit the present political vacuum.

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8: Round-Table Meeting

In their opening remarks, the Secretary of State and the Minister both stressed that the day had been the first step in a process of consultations, which would continue over the coming days and weeks, including in Washington. They highlighted the common ground which had been identified. All parties were committed to the full implementation of the Agreement, including in regard to decommissioning. None wished to re-negotiate it, and all recognised that the institutions had been working well and wished to see them restored as soon as possible.

The parties spoke in seating order. David Trimble, following his aggressive performance at the meeting with the two Governments, adopted a calm and measured tone. There was a need for a collective process, the object of which must be to make the Agreement work in all its aspects. There had been too many fudges: it was time to deliver peace and democracy. He warned, however, that there would be a problem if by 22 May "the issues have not been resolved."

Gerry Adams, in contrast, made clear that Sinn Féin had not had a good meeting with the two Governments. They feared that this round-table was "for the optics." He spoke in familiar terms about the shock still felt within the republican community that "after 50 years of an apartheid state and 30 years of violence the institutions were suspended after 8 weeks". He re-emphasised the need for collective responsibility, but also said that if he ever again did a deal with David Trimble it would have to be in "black and white." The institutions needed to be restored at once. But, while there was a crisis, it could be sorted out.

John Hume underscored the need for the public to be sent a positive message. He urged a public recommitment to the principles which formed the basis of the Mitchell Review.

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Jane Morrice called for (a) a clarification of the objectives of this new process (b) inclusivity and (c) the involvement of civic society through the establishment of the Civic Forum and the North/South Consultative Forum.

Seán Neeson urged clarity and collectivity. He proposed the issue of a statement making clear that all were committed to the Agreement.

Gary McMichael echoed what previous speakers had said about the requirements for clarity and a collective process. People did not know what lay behind the de Chastelain report of 11 February. It had to be clear that the option of force no longer existed.

David Ervine called for practicality, not moralism, but otherwise spoke in the same terms as the other small party representatives.

As the Secretary of State sought to draw the meeting to a close, Sinn Féin (Adams and Bairbre de Brún) insisted that the message to emerge from the meeting should be truthful. All participants were clearly not committed to the Agreement: the British Government was evidently in default. Suggestions by John Hume and Alliance that a statement of some sort should be issued were not pursued.

Ray Bassett/Rory Montgomery
10 March 2000

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