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**Meeting between the Taoiseach and the Women's Coalition on Wednesday, 5 April, 2000 at 3.45 p.m. in Government Buildings**

**Those present at the meeting were:**

***Taoiseach***
***Martin Mansergh***
***Wally Kirwan***
***Ann Whelan***
***Monica McWilliams***
***Jane Morrice***
***Kate Fearon***
***Maria Carroll***

The Taoiseach welcomed Monica McWilliams and her colleagues and indicated he was up to date on what they had being saying in recent weeks. He had received a report of their meeting with Secretary of State Mandelson and Minister Cowen. With reference to the Coalition's letter of 9 March about the decommissioning date of 22 May, the Taoiseach indicated that he had made statements in the Dáil last week effectively giving the same message.

On the question of current developments the Taoiseach indicated that he is trying to get movement going by Easter. It was a tall order but he was trying hard. He had met with David Trimble, Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness last week and with Tony Blair in Lisbon. It was necessary to come to an understanding and timescales. It is hoped there will be progress by the coming weekend. The two Governments may have scenario by then, but there will be two gaps - institutions and decommissioning. The officials working on the issue will have had three meetings by the end of the week. A document, possibly ready by the weekend, will indicate our own views and the views of the British Government.

The Taoiseach expressed confidence that the Ulster Unionist Party and Sinn Féin want to give it another chance and get it across the line. The issue was to get it right. He referred to David Trimble's speech today to the Women's Council and confirmed that David Trimble had said similar things to him. Sinn Féin believe that life will be very difficult after 22 May. There are no resolutions coming to the table. It might be possible to move somewhat but the issues are the same. David Trimble is in difficulty, so is Sinn Féin. The two Governments can achieve a fair amount between them but it has to be factual. There is no way of getting it across the line without a timeframe, thats where the large obstacle is. If it does not have clarity it will not get support from the UUP or the British Government.

Monica McWilliams responding, welcomed the fact that a proposal is being worked on. She recalled some difficult meetings with the Secretary of State, and had met him again on Tuesday. The meetings with Minister Cowen were better. They are trying to build a better relationship with David Trimble. Ms. McWilliams indicated that the Secretary of State wants clarity from Sinn Féin and the IRA. The latter always answered within a context and they have a different context to the Women's Coalition. At a meeting with David Trimble they

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discussed the need to resolve the commonality of where we are at and the decommissioning issue is secondary. There is a need to have Sinn Féin and the Ulster Unionist Party to start communicating again. David Irvine is good but David Trimble does not talk to him. She expressed a view that he could help Sinn Féin whose position has become tied. She believes the latter have changed considerably in the way they now work with others.

The Women's Coalition is confident that the Good Friday Agreement is working and it is worthwhile talking it up. There is a need to focus on the Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland. This is a great advancement as is the Human Rights Commission. Every opportunity should be used to say this. In response to her question on the position in the South it was indicated that the Human Rights Committee Bill was expected to be at Committee Stage by Easter. She continued that there was a need to take up North/South components where such existed so as not to give the impression that there was any rolling back. She instanced some areas where this was being done and stressed the need to send strong messages to rejectionists. Any speeches by Government members in the South should send these messages. The Taoiseach agreed it would be done.

On a different but related issue Ms. McWilliams asked that a contact point for information be established between the Department and the Coalition. It can be done confidentially. She emphasised the better relations they had with the present Government and with the Labour administration in Britain. They had problems with the previous administrations both in the South and in Britain. She expressed a view that Tony Blair was good despite the recent suspensions and touched on the issue of elections in the not too distant future. The Taoiseach said that some commentators were saying that the peace process might be put in cold storage before the elections.

Ms. McWilliams stated that confidence building measurers need to be put in place. Sinn Féin have been stressing the equally and human rights agenda but it was also the agenda of the Women's Coalition and it is part of the Good Friday Agreement. It should not be allowed to be regarded as exclusively the preserve of Sinn Féin. It would be useful to co-ordinate with Scotland, Wales and the UK on Human Rights Commission issues. The Taoiseach in reply advised her to make contact with Niall Crowley to advance this.

Jane Morrice stated that on any implementation plan it would be necessary to learn from past mistakes. There was a need for a contact group or implementation committee to look at the long term of the Good Friday Agreement. The Civic Forum was not up and running. A channel of communication was needed for civic society.

Returning to the current discussions the Taoiseach stated that the planned informal deadline for Easter was not being made public. The UUP and the British Government were focusing on 22 May. The Taoiseach was trying to move away from that date. There will be difficulties if statements on demilitarisation or decommissioning are vague or not set to a formula.

Jane Morrice acknowledged that decommission was a voluntary act and that paramilitary organisations should set their own timetables.
The Taoiseach had spoken in January with the negotiations for the ANC in South Africa and had met them again on Tuesday in Cairo. They are a good example of how things can be



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done. When there was an agreed level of confidence, before the Government was set up, at a point to be called by the ANC, they would come to the idea, an irrevocable point, that they would no longer engage in armed conflict and that the arms issue would be dealt with. They actually dumped arms. Ms. McWilliams added that they dumped arms, not saying how much and those people who decommissioned were brought into the forces. They were no longer prescribed.

She mentioned a TV programme, 'Cutting Edge' being prepared on the Good Friday Agreement. This is similar to one previously done on South Africa. The message should be "we are not going back; an imperfect peace is better than what was there before".

The Taoiseach made the point that decommissioning is part of the Agreement. President Clinton and others have stated it must be dealt with. He asked for a view as to how people would feel if a proposal was made and Sinn Féin were put back in Government with decommissioning to be dealt with later. Ms. McWilliams responded saying there were different views. People want the institutions, they want peace and responsibility for their future. They also need reassurance that it will happen in time. It was important to have a ceasefire, the pledge of office and a commitment. She considers that Sinn Féin cannot give a timetable. The Taoiseach stated that certain words may move the British Government somewhat, but they were still talking about gestures. In Hillsboro' it was very close to an agreement on an act of reconciliation but in the end Sinn Féin said no. Martin Mansergh observed that when Sinn Féin came close the UUP drew back. The Taoiseach confirmed that in his view Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness are serious in seeking a solution. Martin Mansergh pointed out that the issue was the IRA letting go and ceding control to Sinn Féin. The Taoiseach stressed the difficulty of explaining this aspect to the UK side.

Ms. McWilliams asked if David Trimble believed that this is where his party wanted to be currently. The Taoiseach stated there were two problems, one was with the British Government and the other with the delegates. David Trimble would need something to offer. He stated that the Women's Coalition could take credit for pushing the balance of sanity. There is a need to help the UUP. David Trimble will require product upfront. The issue is to move him this side of Easter on product. A big push is not being planned. Discussion continued on the advisers around David Trimble and the fact that they are particularly anti-provisionals.

The meeting concluded with the Taoiseach thanking the Women's Coalition, and confirming that he will keep in touch.

5 April, 2000.

**c.c.** P/Secretary to the Taoiseach
Secretary-General Teahon
Dr. Martin Mansergh
Mr. Walter Kirwan
Secretary Gallagher, Department of Foreign Affairs



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