

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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Reference Code:	2023/154/34
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Meeting with First Minister and Delegation

The Taoiseach Mr. Bertie Ahern TD met with the First Minister Mr. David Trimble MP in Government Buildings at 11.00 am followed by a press conference on the steps outside. Mr. Trimble was accompanied by Ken Maginnis MP, David Campbell, David Kerr and Daniel Lowry. The Taoiseach was accompanied by the Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs Ms. Liz O'Donnell TD, and by Paddy Teahon, Dermot Gallagher and the undersigned.

Following a brief discussion of the Taoiseach's South Africa visit, the Taoiseach said that he would give the utmost help to overcome the present difficulties, with the effort coming from the usual sources.

Ken Maginnis said they had been sandbagged, in the overturning of the police, the disqualification legislation, and access to the House (which may be put back), all of which had a cumulative effect. While the press kept speculating on what David Trimble might have to do on 12 February, if the de Chastelain report this month was negative, the onus really falls on the two Governments. Things should not hang in limbo till 12 February.

The Taoiseach said de Chastelain has to report, and the Government would do everything possible to get a positive report. He accepted that people were not going to wait till 12 February.

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Maginnis reiterated that there was onus on ourselves and the Secretary of State to make sure that people realised what was the expectation.

The Taoiseach referred to what he had said in Capetown last week, and Maginnis said that had been very helpful. The Taoiseach said the Republican Movement would have to understand this was for real, and come to a decision that would made de Chastelain happy and move towards May.

Maginnis said it was past the stage where a belief or opinion as to intention would suffice. All other elements were now in place. He admitted that it would be difficult if he said de Chastelain had an agreement on decommissioning by 22 May, as that would be an offer they could not refuse. But it would have to be a tangible promise.

The Taoiseach said de Chastelain had reported (on 10 December) that the circumstances now existed for decommissioning to occur.

David Trimble said he appreciated what the Taoiseach had said since, and he hoped there would be a good positive development. If there were still a problem by the beginning of February, he could not get UUC support with a question mark or an opinion. Some of his 'dear friends' were already waiting to assemble.

Paddy Teahon said we have continuously emphasised that there was no room for manoeuvre.

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David Trimble said some journalists had been briefed, and this was apparently Brian Keenan's opinion, that a refusal to decommission would engender even greater splits in Unionism. But this was gravely mistaken. Divisions would not be exacerbated.

Paddy Teahon said that point had never been put to us. I said Adams would be too sophisticated to believe that. Dermot Gallagher said it would be very much a minority view.

The Taoiseach said they were probably more worried about a split in their own ranks.

It was suggested that McKevitt was trying to keep the head down, and exploit differences, when they arose.

Paddy Teahon spoke of the emotional reaction. It was not a long time from January to May. Each time the Republican Movement didn't do something, the demand became higher. If they would only anticipate, they would get a more favourable reaction.

The Taoiseach expressed the hope that we would soon be getting into the more progressive side of things.

David Trimble thought it would take a month or two to get over running-in problems. He was positive about Martin McGuinness, but Bairbre de Bruin was difficult to get on with. There was some reluctance to take decisions, to grasp nettles.

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Paddy Teahon noted that Executive members and their advisers had been taken off the decommissioning problem, which on the one hand was a sign they took the Executive seriously, but on the other hand had definite drawbacks, a point which everyone agreed. Dermot Gallagher said Aidan McAteer seemed snowed under. Trimble agreed that the health and agriculture portfolios represented 'hospital passes'.

The Taoiseach said there was no good news in prospect for agriculture anywhere. The EU would have to take produce from places like Poland.

Dermot Gallagher referred to Peter Robinson's plans to come down and discuss informally North-South cooperation. David Trimble commented on his not being prepared to come to the NSMC, and trying to find a way round his obligations. His attitude was, while not disagreeing, to proceed with caution. It was a sign Peter wanted to get involved, whereas Dodds wanted to hold back. He had suggested to Dodds that the beginning of decommissioning was the moment to get off the hook.

Ken Maginnis said if de Chastelain was negative, the Assembly would be in suspense, and we would be back into review.

The Taoiseach said that would be a disaster. The two Governments would then have to take stock, but we would do the utmost to avoid that situation.

Ken Maginnis said he didn't want to see everything achieved come tumbling down, but the whole weight should not be placed on David Trimble's shoulders. They needed some decommissioning before 12 February. The

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Taoiseach was supportive. Paddy Teahon stressed the importance of not appearing to be looking for another way out.



21 January 2000

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