

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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Secretary - General Taoiseach
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Report of meeting between the Taoiseach and the Lord Mayor of Belfast, Mr. Robert Stoker, accompanied by Mr. Robert Saulters, Grand Master of the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland and Mr. Frank McCoubrey, UDP, Government Buildings, 8 February, 2000 at 1.15 p.m.

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1. Present with the Taoiseach at the meeting were Dr. Martin Mansergh, Special Adviser and the undersigned. The Belfast party had been escorted to the meeting by Ms. Mary White of Fianna Fáil, with a group from the Fianna Fáil Women's Group, who were hosting the visitors. The Taoiseach met the full group and photos were taken. Further photos were taken of the Taoiseach with the Belfast visitors in the Taoiseach's room before the commencement of the meeting proper. The Lord Mayor and Mr. Saulters signed the Visitors Book. The meeting lasted about 30 minutes.

2. Following introductory references to Northern Ireland representation at the Holiday Fair, the attendance of the Lord Mayor at the AGM in Limerick of the Community Games Movement and the benefits of that movement for young people and for fostering mutual understanding, attention turned to political matters.

3. Referring to decommissioning, the Taoiseach said we are doing all we can to make progress and to get commitments. The Lord Mayor said that the sensible people had done all they could to implement what was in the Good Friday Agreement. Some frustration was now creeping in. Joe Bloggs could not understand why paramilitaries want to hold on to guns. The Taoiseach said that the general view in Dublin was that Mr. Dermot Nesbitt had got the better of the exchanges on TV the previous evening (with Mr. Mitchell McLoughlin). In the past, there might have been a tendency for the public to side with the spokesperson for nationalists. It was new when people here sided with the reasonable position taken by the unionist representative.

4. The Taoiseach continued that the Government had been trying solidly since the previous Saturday week. They were now getting frustrated that there had not been more action from the Republican Movement. Their difficulty was around a single issue. If they were unable to carry all the movement with them, it could split, which would be of no benefit to anybody and could lead to an accretion of strength to the 'Real IRA'. Having said that, we feel that David Trimble is deserving of a clear unambiguous position and we are pressing to obtain this. Mr. McCoubrey said that Trimble was under a lot of pressure, as his party Council meeting approached.

5. The Taoiseach said that he would have much preferred had Trimble not introduced that deadline. But he realised why it was necessary for him to do so. It was satisfactory that the most recent IRA statement acknowledged, for the first time, that decommissioning had to be dealt with. The logic of this was to move on to a clear statement of what they would do and that might as well be made now, when it could have some impact. In those circumstances, we would have a good context for dealing with the dissidents. In impeding them, we had been lucky so far and had been able to score a lot of successful hits on them, because of good intelligence. We were determined to deal with them and stood ready to use the full range of powers we had. If it was only the current dissidents that had to be dealt with, it would be easier. that

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was a manageable task. We would not want the disaffection to wider out to include people who were now part of the Provisional IRA.

6. The Lord Mayor said that unionist people were able to see that people were working hard and putting the Republicans under pressure. But frustration was now creeping in. It was not only on the issue of arms. There was a lack of other confidence-building measures relevant to Orange culture - Mr. Saulters would know more about this, as he had been heavily involved. The Taoiseach commented that the action taken last year by the Orange Order leadership had de-escalated a potentially very difficult situation in regard to Drumcree. Mr. Saulters responded that the Order had tried hard in each of the last two years but that he had recently put the question to the Secretary of State : what had they to show for it? Mr. McCoubrey said that his party, the UDP, were currently working hard to keep the situation calm but in the face of increasing frustration on the part of loyalists.

7. Lord Mayor Stoker said that the anti-Agreement people were beginning to get the upper hand within unionism. The DUP could make marked gains and get the upper hand. The Taoiseach said that he was working on the basis that decommissioning would happen. How was the question. It had to happen. He had picked up in dealings with Martin McGuinness, that the preferred way for republicans was to bring about a political situation in which the IRA would be disbanded. In that situation, the issue of arms would become irrelevant. This cannot happen, for any of the paramilitary organisations tomorrow - they have all suffered the same losses/ but we should be working towards a time when it can happen. It is necessary to be conscious of the risk of some drift from paramilitaries into drugs groups - we have had some experience already of that in this jurisdiction. This is why one has to try to get disbandment.

8. As regards the handing in or destruction problem, he (the Taoiseach) had thought that the act of reconciliation idea discussed at Hillsborough the previous April had offered a way forward but regrettably the republicans had not 'bought it'. Later, he had thought that New Year's Eve, on the cusp of a new Millennium, had offered an unrivalled opportunity for some arms to be put beyond use but his persuasive powers had proven unavailing. More recently the bottom end of the most recent statement by the IRA - after its denunciation of Mr. Mandelson - marked a new step forward for them. He (the Taoiseach) would like the IRA now to say that decommissioning would happen next week or by 22 May but this was probably "not on". But if they could be brought to give a firm commitment to do it, that would be a major step forward.

9. Dr. Mansergh referred to awareness that the UDA were considering what contribution they could make. Mr. McCoubrey said that John White was trying to put pressure on the UFF to hand over some arms, to make some gesture that would put pressure on the IRA.

10. The Taoiseach said that any documents to emerge on the decommissioning issue would have to have certainty and firmness of intention in them. People were entitled to some payback. His party, Fianna Fáil, was the largest republican group in Ireland

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and the membership consider it unreasonable that there has not been an adequate response by the IRA. He had found no demur from that position in a recent meeting with strong Fianna Fáil people in North Mayo. It would not always have been so but people there felt that David Trimble had shown courage and had fulfilled his commitments.

11. The Lord Mayor said that on the previous day, he had been speaking to some more moderate Sinn Féin councillors who would not have had previous involvement on the military side. One of them had thought that some decommissioning was going to happen over the couple of days just past. The Taoiseach said that he did not personally know Mr. McKevitt but that he receives reports that he is able to intimidate people and that our security people say that, on his record, people are right to be concerned about his responses.

12. He (the Taoiseach) was convinced from his dealings with Adams and McGuinness that they are genuinely trying to move the situation on. There had at times been tough words between them and the Government side but, at bottom, their motivation was good.

13. The Taoiseach asked Mr. Saulters how were things in the Portadown area. If we were able to do anything to help, we would be ready to do so. Mr. Pádraic White was working on the ground with people on the Garvaghey Road to try to encourage an evolution in people's attitudes. We were using intermediaries to try to resolve the impasse and were ready to try to do so. He hoped we would be able to demonstrate that we could have an Orange march in Dublin next summer. [Here, Mr. Saulters originally misunderstood and asked if the Taoiseach was referring to Rossnowlagh - it appeared that he had been unaware of the planned Orange Order march in Dublin]. The Taoiseach noted that the Lord Mayor of Dublin was helping with arrangements for the march by the Dublin and Wicklow lodges. Dr. Mansergh said that the only people worried about the march were the Church of Ireland authorities in the Republic.

14. The Taoiseach reiterated that he was ready to help to defuse problems about Orange Order parades in the North. He respected what the Order had done last year. This had been seen and noted by ordinary people in the South. Mr. Saulters said that the leadership of the Order were still receiving some repercussions. The Taoiseach concluded the meeting by saying that, assuming it was possible to overcome the current impasse, we were ready to do anything we could to help in regard to resolving parades problems, quietly and confidentially. The visitors then thanked the Taoiseach and took their leave.

Walter P. Kirwan,
Assistant Secretary,
Northern Ireland Division.

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