

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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SECRET

Meeting of Implementation Group on the Good Friday Agreement

28 March 2000

1. The first meeting of the Implementation Group took place in Stormont House on Tuesday 28 March 2000. The British delegation consisted of Jonathan Powell, Bill Jeffrey, David Watkins and Jonathan Stephens. The Irish delegation was made up of Dermot Gallagher, Tim Dalton, Martin Mansergh and Ray Bassett. The meeting lasted 90 minutes and was followed by lunch.

2. The need for the absolute confidentiality of the group's work was emphasised by the British side, given the sensitivity of the issues under consideration, in particular in the demilitarisation area.

3. The British said it was vital that the two governments, as they went down this sensitive road, worked in the closest cooperation and with full transparency. Gallagher made the point that only a radical approach would have any hope of success, although we of course recognised the risks involved. We needed to make a fine judgement of the maximum strain that each side could bear, and build a package around this.

4. There was a short discussion on the outcome of the UUC meeting on Saturday. Jeffrey felt that Trimble's position had been weakened and that the next leadership attempt would be designed to "kill not wound". Trimble and his supporters had foolishly allowed expectations of his likely margin of victory to rise.

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5. Trimble said to the British on Monday that devolution would not now be feasible without "something symbolic" on the RUC. Powell suggested, however, that this should not be taken literally; he felt that, if the Republicans put something significant on the table, Trimble would still be in play and could go back to the UUP Council on this basis. Overall, however, Trimble's position had not been strengthened by suspension.

IRA Statement

6. Gallagher and Dalton both felt that the IRA would need to have a clear sense of the overall implementation package on offer before it could be tempted to show its hand. Dalton saw a danger that Republicans might take the view that Trimble had become a lame-duck leader, and might decide to wait until a new figure emerged before again opting into serious negotiations. However, we had no option but to press forward. The Minister for Foreign Affairs was trying to disabuse Martin McGuinness of the sense of waiting for a new leader, and to urge him to row in with the strategy of the Governments.

7. The British side made the point that, in addition to an IRA statement, Trimble needed something tangible in the short-term if he was to have any chance of selling a package to his party. Powell gave a sense, in this regard, that the British were thinking in terms of some form of secure dumping. However, they added that anything of this nature would need to be verifiable. Dalton said that the IRA had not so far rejected the need for verification, and he wondered if saying arms were "verifiably secure" might be an approach worth pursuing. In that regard, the arms would still be under IRA control, as an intermediate stage; Mansergh added that this was the Republican offer in 1923.

8. Dalton stressed that no offer should be made to Republicans until we were sure that it would be deliverable on their side. When given too much time,

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there was a tendency for Republicans to "rubbish" proposals. The timing of any package was vital.

9. At this stage, Gallagher set out the three elements which he saw an IRA statement containing:

   (a) in the context of the full implementation of the Agreement, Republicans would rely in future on exclusively political means to remove the causes of conflict;

   (b) they would initiate a process under de Chastelain that would put arms beyond use verifiably (by a particular date);

   (c) in the interim, their guns would remain silent, would be no threat to anyone, and would be verifiably secure.

10. Gallagher saw such a statement coming after the restoration of the institutions but before a UUC meeting. This would enable the Governments to re-establish the institutions - a central Republican demand - before the statement issued. It would also give Trimble the option of not calling a meeting of the Executive before (a) the IRA issued their statement and (b) the UUP Council had bought into the package. The British cautioned that Trimble might have to go to his Council in advance of the institutions being established. They also saw an end-date for decommissioning as being the bottom line for Trimble. It was agreed that it would be best if the IRA statement were issued publicly and not mediated through de Chastelain.

Normalisation/Demilitarisation

11. Jeffrey said that the implementation of Patten and Criminal Justice Review recommendations were much easier to handle than demilitarisation, given that the way forward in these cases had been charted by outside reports. The real difficulty related to demilitarisation, on which the British would also have to take into account the advice of the security forces.

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12. Gallagher made the point that security services very often found reasons for not taking risks. Mansergh added that there were times when democratically elected Governments had to overrule their security advisors. He mentioned the visit of Mo Mowlam to the Maze Prison as a case in point. Dalton advised against adopting a blanket approach; a more targeted exercise, which examined the need for individual installations, might be a more productive way forward.

13. Watkins said that the major security problem for the British was how to police South Armagh. It simply was not possible to do so without military protection. He instanced a recent case where debt collectors were badly beaten in the area. If the security towers were to be dismantled, there would have to be a huge increase in soldiers on the ground.

14. Gallagher, responding sharply, said that there needed to be a reality check here. For some thirty years there had, in effect, been no policing of South Armagh. Barracks and towers were serviced by helicopter, with even rubbish being removed by this route. The assessment of a threat in the area could not be realistically made on the basis of whether debts were collected or dog licenses were taken out. Powell asked would South Armagh go unpoliced in our scenario. We said that there would be a period when it would be lightly policed. But if we succeeded in getting the institutions back, and Patten was implemented, we could finally move towards normal policing in South Armagh.

15. Watkins raised the threat from Republican dissidents. He said that there was a danger that the RIRA would take advantage of any deal which "stretched the IRA to the limit". He claimed that the RIRA was already making inroads in the South Armagh area.

16. Gallagher and Dalton argued that, if we got a decent IRA statement, it would

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clearly change the nature of the threat. Indeed, Ronnie Flanagan had made this very point. This should be exploited and, over the following three months, planned security changes on the ground should take place. These, in particular, should remove some of the "in your face" installations. Their removal would bring home to public opinion that politics was achieving change and should help to marginalise the dissidents. This, in turn, would facilitate further security moves over the following three month period, and so on.

17. The Irish side made the point that the threat from the RIRA would have to be dealt with by a combination of the two Governments, public opinion and, to some extent, by the Provisional movement itself, which would have a vested interest in preventing the RIRA from gaining any ground.

18. Watkins conceded that the RIRA was not nearly as strong as the IRA but, at the same time, they had reached a level where the IRA would not "take them on". Gallagher said that this was an additional reason to move urgently on restoring the institutions. In this regard, the response from Adams and McGuinness was that they were prepared to give it one more go, but that they needed an offer before going back to the IRA.

Sanction

19. Jeffrey argued that, for Trimble to be brought fully on board, some sanction on Republicans was required if they didn't deliver. Mansergh emphasised that the institutions would have to be restored for good, adding that, at least in the short term, we were breaking the link between decommissioning and devolution. If the IRA failed to deliver, Unionists could walk out of the Executive. Gallagher warned against holding the institutions hostage to sanctions. This might simply wreck our whole strategy. It was agreed that we could not take this aspect any further at this time, and it might best be looked at when we saw the substance of any IRA statement.

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Conclusion

20. In conclusion, Jeffrey suggested that the British side draft a possible IRA statement, with the Irish side preparing an indicative demilitarisation package. These papers might be exchanged on Friday. A further meeting of the group might follow at 10am on Monday in Downing Street.

21. Finally, Powell said that the Prime Minister was very anxious to become re-engaged actively in the process at the earliest possible moment. The 22 May was still a crucial psychological date. Powell said the Prime Minister might have to opt out by 15 May (the baby was due on the 20th). It was agreed that our target date for a deal remained Easter, with the possibility of this being exceeded by a week or two not being ruled out (though this should not be said publicly).

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