



An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

Reference Code: 2021/97/2

Creator(s): Department of the Taoiseach

Accession Conditions: Open

Copyright: National Archives, Ireland. May only be reproduced with the written permission of the Director of the National Archives.

AN RÚNAÍOCHT ANGLA-ÉIREANNACH

ANGLO-IRISH SECRETARIAT

BÉAL FEIRSTE

BELFAST

Confidential

1 November 1995

Mr Sean O hUiginn
Second Secretary
Anglo-Irish Division
Department of Foreign Affairs.

cc Tairneach

P. Tealen

F. Munnay

S. Hane

W 1.11

Dear Second Secretary

Ancram/McGuinness meeting (31 October)

We have just received the following briefing on the meeting which took place yesterday between Michael Ancram and Martin McGuinness.

Ancram was accompanied by Quentin Thomas and Tony Beeton and McGuinness was accompanied by Gerry Kelly and Siobhan O'Hanlon. The meeting lasted for three hours (including two breaks, each at Sinn Fein's request).

The British note on the meeting summarises its outcome in the following terms:

- A useful exchange, with a genuine engagement on the issues;
- Sinn Fein made clear at an early stage that they would be prepared to engage with an international body;
- Two points of difficulty arose: (i) Sinn Fein's desire for an early and definite date for the launch of substantive negotiations; (ii) the terms of reference for the international body.

Michael Ancram registered at the outset British Government concern at the recent punishment beatings. There was no response from Sinn Fein.

McGuinness asked whether the "building blocks" paper had been given to the other parties. On hearing that it had, he registered Sinn Fein's concern that it would become public. Ancram responded robustly, according to the British account. He made clear that it was a British Government paper only and was not being put forward as representing the views of the two Governments. It was the British Government's task to represent all the parties around the table. It had a duty to try to sound out all the parties on the components of the

scheme. The British note comments that the points made by Sinn Fein in response were "not advanced with much vigour".

McGuinness identified three key aspects of the "building blocks" paper: a date for all-party talks, the political track arrangements and the terms of reference for the international body.

Using what the British note describes as a "careful formula", he confirmed that Sinn Fein would "speak to the international body authoritatively on the position of IRA weapons and the issue of how the gun could be taken out of Irish politics". He subsequently made clear, however, that this did not amount to speaking on behalf of the IRA.

Proceeding to the date issue, he stressed the importance of an early and definite date for the launching of substantive talks. The British side responded as follows:

- A fixed date would imply that what preceded it was purely synthetic;
- This would be counter-productive with the Unionists and others;
- A target date allowing a realistic timetable would reflect the practical realities.

Angram made clear that, if the other elements of the scheme were in place, the British Government would envisage setting a target date at the time of the launching of the scheme. What that date was, however, would depend in part on the international body's own assessment of what was practicable.

Sinn Fein were then asked about the relative importance to them of (a) an early date; or (b) a fixed date. According to the British account, they dodged this question by emphasising that there should be no preconditions. McGuinness told Angram that Sinn Fein distrusted the British Government. Angram "cheerfully explained that the feeling was mutual". The British note comments at this point that "unaccountably this exchange lightened the atmosphere".

Discussion then turned to whether and how an elected body could play a part in the political track of the scheme. The British side emphasised that they were not committed to such an approach but saw it as a proper subject for discussion in the political track. While they understood that Unionists attached importance to an election for the purpose of legitimising contact with Sinn Fein, they emphasised that they themselves had an open mind on the subject. Sinn Fein acknowledged that this was an appropriate topic for discussion but said that they saw it as falling within the scope of substantive talks. According to the British account, the issue was not resolved but the British side had no sense that this was a breaking-point for Sinn Fein.

In a discussion of the arms dimension, Angram reaffirmed the British Government's commitment to "Washington One, Two and Three". Turning to the terms of reference for the body as indicated in the "building blocks" paper, McGuinness noted that the word "unauthorised" was now being used instead of "illegal" or "paramilitary". This was still unacceptable to them. The wrong terms of reference would constitute an "insurmountable

problem" for Sinn Fein. Would the British Government be willing to look at other approaches?

The British side emphasised that they could not accept an equivalence between illegal arms and constitutional forces. In discussion, they canvassed - "without commitment and for the purpose of testing views" - three different approaches:

- Removing the word "unauthorised", but with the British Government explaining in response to questions that the body would deal with illegal weapons.

Sinn Fein appeared to find this acceptable on the basis that each side could say what it wished. What seemed to matter to them was the actual wording in the terms of reference - they did not want the word "unauthorised" in these.

- Linking the point about "responsive measures" in para 12 of the paper more closely to para 7. This might be done, for example, by reaffirming the British Government's objective of achieving a totally civilian policing arrangement and going on to say that, "against that background", the body would be asked to examine the question of the removal of unauthorised arms. Sinn Fein's response was negative (this approach would not alter the terms of reference as presently drafted).
- Making clear that the body's task would be to look at unauthorised arms (however described), but going on to say that, in undertaking this, it should take account of any matter considered relevant by those giving evidence to the body. Sinn Fein showed considerable interest in this approach, while obviously reserving its position until it saw what this looked like on paper (McGuinness warned that there could be "no fudge" and Kelly said that there should be no "sleight of hand".)

Sinn Fein emphasised that they were not seeking equivalence with what the British Government regarded as constitutional arms. However, they attached importance to being able to say honestly to their own supporters that their approach to the body was not inconsistent with the Sinn Fein analysis (which was that arms held on all sides were part of the problem, stemming - as Sinn Fein put it - from "inappropriate political arrangements").

Ancram asked if Sinn Fein were content with the two indents in para seven of the paper (if the preamble were made acceptable). According to the British note, McGuinness declined to give a clear response despite repeated pressure. He said, however, that, if the "insurmountable obstacle" were overcome, Sinn Fein would be willing to look at the "nitty-gritty".

On the international body, Sinn Fein asked the following questions:

- What progress has there been in relation to membership?

(The British side replied that work was going on but that there has been no definite outcome so far).

- What is meant by para 10's suggestion that the body would "consult widely"?

(The British side said that this was in part a response to a discussion at the last meeting. The body would be expected to talk to those who might have some influence over illegal weapons, but also to those who had views on the issue and needed to be satisfied about it. According to the British note, Sinn Fein "appeared satisfied with this").

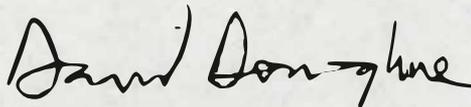
- Would the body make a public report?

(The British side said that this had not been considered or decided in detail. It was envisaged, however, that the body would put something into the public domain as it was hoped that all sides would consider its report on its merits (as Sinn Fein had seemed to agree at the last meeting).

After a recess, Sinn Fein came back to emphasise that the British Government should be under no illusions. There were two obstacles (not one): Sinn Fein's desire for an early and fixed date and its need to be satisfied about the terms of reference.

Sinn Fein pressed for a further meeting later this week and Ancram agreed to a meeting on Friday morning at 10 am.

Yours sincerely



David Donoghue
Joint Secretary