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Meeting between the Government and Sinn Fein
Government Buildings, 28th August, 1995

for yr files.
SLL
29/8

Present were:

Government: The Taoiseach, Tanaiste, Minister for Social Welfare, Mr. Paddy Teahon, Mr. Sean O hUiginn.

Sinn Fein: Mr. Gerry Adams, Mr. Martin McGuinness, Ms. Lucilita Breathnach, Ms. Rita O'Hare, Ms. Siobhán O'Hanlon.

1. The meeting lasted two and a half hours. Opening the meeting the Taoiseach welcomed the year of peace. It was important to build on that through dialogue between the relevant parties: Decisions were needed not about fundamental principles, but the mechanics, "what will work". The Taoiseach recapitulated for Sinn Fein the Government's thinking on the parallel approach. The aim of the Government was to set a target date for round table talks. That would require a lot of work with the British. The Government needed to be sure that if they went over the top in pursuit of early round table talks, Sinn Fein would in turn recommend to the IRA that they make the corresponding moves on the Commission.
2. The Taoiseach felt that there was a necessary and useful phase of bilateral and trilateral meetings to be gone through for agenda identification, etc. He was fully conscious of the fear that bilaterals would be drawn-out, or would be used selectively by the British. For that reason the Irish Government was advocating a limited phase with an end date in mind. However, they wanted to see the International Commission up and working on issues such as

principles, identification of amounts involved, schedules, etc.

3. The Taoiseach said he had also spoke to unionists. They were concerned that they would be trapped into political dialogue while nothing happened on decommissioning. This was an ironic mirror image of the Sinn Fein concern that they could be trapped into decommissioning without political progress. The target date offered reassurance to both sides. The Government saw the November period as the target. The Taoiseach again requested Sinn Fein to persuade the IRA to cooperate with the international Commission.

4. Mr. Adams asked if the Irish Government had proposed to the British that there should be all-party talks. The Taoiseach confirmed this had been done a long time ago. There was a semantic issue whether all-party talks meant everyone talking simultaneously, or everyone around the same table. He felt the latter stage should be inaugurated only when it was useful and all parties would turn up.

5. Mr. Adams said he wanted to give the Irish Government a sense of the situation. The process needed some imaginative injection which gave people confidence that the British Government were "prepared to address the core issues". There was little evidence that was the case. There was no way the IRA would cooperate with an international Commission at this time. Mayhew's speech on Friday and Michael Ancram's remarks this morning were insisting that the IRA decommissioning had to have a beginning, a middle and an end. Sinn Fein had no room for manoeuvre on it. If the Irish Government had detailed propositions, they could be looked at. But in terms of the broad principle, he could not be hopeful.

6. Mr. Adams instanced the behaviour of the RUC, substantive worsening of prison conditions, etc, as giving nationalists in Northern Ireland a sense that the British could continue in this vein forever. They could indulge in "fishing trips" on this and that. He felt a date should be set for all-party talks. He had no objection to networking, setting agendas, etc., but the Sinn Fein view was that set out in the letter send that day to the Taoiseach. (He mentioned apologetically that the letter had been finished only ten minutes before the meeting, and that he did not expect a reaction to it at the meeting). He had no problem with the particular route whereby parties arrived at round-table talks. Sinn Fein knew the unionists did not want to engage for tactical reasons. No choice was being put up to them. There was a ground-swell of grassroots unionist opinion in favour of talks, but that had no opportunity to coalesce because the British were not playing fair.

7. Mr. Adams emphasised again and again that after twelve months of peace the key was to move to all-party talks. If a determined effort were being made, people would be patient about the length of time it took, but they would be impatient if no-one was seeking to address it seriously. He stressed that the British were not referees. The Republican position on decommissioning he had pointed out to O hUiginn and Teahon was accurate. The Irish Government might consider that Sinn Fein were playing hardball, but the word on the ground in Northern Ireland was that the peace process was over. People did not want to go back to violence, but that was the view on the ground. People looked to the British Government to match the efforts others were making on the peace process. The present position was reinforcing traditional republican attitudes to the British Government.

8. Mr. Adams repeated that the Commission was "not a runner in his view", but if there was a detailed proposal he would be willing to hear it. The decisive point was when the British and Irish Governments would set a date for all-party talks to commence. Mr. McGuinness said that a year after the cessation which gave such great hopes peoples expectations were taking a dive. No talking was taking place. The Taoiseach objected that the British were already talking to Sinn Fein. Mr. McGuinness said that people had no faith in the bilateral or trilateral approach. The British Government were simply using the unionists as a pretext.

9. The Taoiseach quoted from the Sinn Fein letter that the ending of British rule was their objective. He pointed to the likely difficulties in dealing with people whose fundamental aspirations were to hold onto the Union.

10. Mr. Adams stressed that Sinn Fein were prepared to abide by a negotiated settlement. They understood well they would be in a minority around the table but they were ready to argue their case. Sinn Fein had more difficulties than anyone else with talks. Others had in practice given up on a united Ireland approach. However, Sinn Fein were prepared to take that risk. He recalled the commitments of the British Government in the Joint Declaration, the Framework Document, etc., to encouraging agreement between the people of the island and acknowledging the need for all-party talks. These commitments were not being observed. Unionists had a negative power of veto by refusing to engage.

11. The Tanaiste objected that all parties could put up fences if they so choose. However, he felt the two sides were not so far apart. Sinn Fein had sought a very determined push on talks. The Taoiseach had outlined how that push had been made. A target date would be set about two months down the

line. That would give the British space to get things into position. As one who had mooted the Commission at an early stage, the Tanaiste felt it would also give space to everyone. The Government were seeking a way around a roadblock, and needed to get agreement from the British also.

12. Mr. McGuinness objected that that was the Dublin view but the London view was different. The British Government seemed scared of the negotiating table.
13. The Tanaiste said he had discussed with the British the need for pressure on the unionists. If the process was in place, those pressures could be brought into play. Mr. Adams said he accepted that the Irish Government had "made their pitch". The crux of the matter was that the British refused all-party talks and the IRA refused decommissioning. He enquired whether the British were prepared to announce a deadline at the Summit.
14. The Taoiseach thought yes, provided the Republicans cooperated with the Commission. Otherwise there would be no parallel process. He stressed the Irish Government were trying to find a way around decommissioning as a precondition. That could be achieved by dealing with it as a process, not decommissioning on day one. Mr. Adams said that he "went cold" when he heard questions being raised such as "what equipment is there?". That was totally unprecedented in Irish history. The Tanaiste referred to an interview by Andrew Hunter earlier that day setting out the Tory agenda. He instanced the Greek civil war as a precedent for a prior decommissioning arms in favour of a political process.
15. Mr. Adams recalled that there had been outbreaks of conflict for seventy-five years and different sections of the

community had to defend themselves from time to time. A considerable loyalist arms factory had been found in Co. Down. There were supply links to a Ministry of Defence official in Durham. If the British thought to use the Commission to press their demand for the surrender of weapons, "not even Patrick Pearse out of the grave" would persuade the IRA of that. Of course all weapons had to be got rid of, but Sinn Fein had to uphold the rights of their electorate. They were not the IRA. The process of alienation had been well documented since the hunger strikes. Victims such as Eddie Fullerton or the people shot in the Sinn Fein office could not die for nothing. There would be no surrender.

16. The Taoiseach asked if the Governments went ahead and set up all-party talks and, simultaneously, the Commission, would Sinn Fein say they could not even meet and talk with the Commission?. Mr. Adams said Sinn Fein would meet everyone. However he would not deceive the IRA about other people, and would not deceive other people about the IRA. Even if Sinn Fein agreed, the IRA would not. The IRA had made a gesture in good faith. The decommissioning agenda was "kicking the sleeping dog".
17. The Taoiseach pointed to the concern by unionists that the weapons might be used against them or as a veiled method of coercion in talks. Mr. McGuinness said they could object the same things about Paisley and the Loyalist death squads, largely armed by the British. The Taoiseach suggested that licensed weapons could also be looked at in the ambit of the Commission. The essential thing was that the process should move forward and not be static.
18. Messrs. McGuinness and Adams recalled various comments on the radio, etc., to show that the decommissioning demand was seen as a surrender. Peter McLachlan, a former Minister in

Stormont, had spoken at the Humbert School of "guns as a means of communication". He had accepted that paramilitaries would not abandon one voice until they had achieved another. Mr. Adams repeated at some length his arguments about the need for all-party talks, that the British were not a referee and voiced particular objection to equating Sinn Fein with the loyalists, who did not even pretend to have the mandate, and, he implied, were British surrogates.

19. The Taoiseach recapitulated that, firstly, we needed a negotiating conference with everyone there and, secondly, to create confidence about the good faith of the process to take the gun out of politics. That would be possible if there was IRA cooperation on the process of decommissioning. Mr. McGuinness asked what was the British view. Were they going to give up the instalment? The Taoiseach pointed out the British also had "pride". In a stand-off the best approach was to change the context. If he could not point to prospects for progress on the decommissioning issue, then he could not do anything.

20. Mr. Adams again asked whether the intention was that the summit would announce all-party talks. The Taoiseach and the Tanaiste indicated that that was the intention and they would be pressing as hard as possible to achieve that. Mr. Adams enquired why not an October target. The Taoiseach and Tanaiste explained why, in their judgement, November was about the right length of time. Mr. Adams again enquired why the Summit would not announce that both Governments were initiating the process through a Conference on procedures to which they were convening all parties. The Taoiseach explained at some length that unionists would not show up and that it would be extremely negative to begin a process where one significant group lacked all ownership. The DUP staying away might be less decisive. Mr. Adams said he

needed to know with great clarity whether the Irish Government had put the idea of a conference to kick-start the process to the British.

21. The Taoiseach explained how he had taken up the Sinn Fein suggestion. The Conference would occur at an early stage, even if not at the very beginning. Mr. Adams repeated his view that to go to the IRA with the proposition of a Commission in the present circumstances "won't even get a look at". He set out at length the difficulties created for him by press leaks. Within a day or two of the letter from the Taoiseach he had read about the Government's position in Stephen Collins in the Sunday Tribune, Rory Godson in the Sunday Independent, etc. That created great difficulties for him at a decisive delicate phase. The Taoiseach pointed out that Sinn Fein were constantly setting out their own position, and did not see why there should be a problem with the Irish Government doing so.

22. The Minister for Social Welfare asked if there was no conference, and the IRA was not willing to make a gesture, where did that leave matters? Mr. Adams said he did not know. The Taoiseach pointed out that if Sinn Fein accepted the principle of decommissioning there should not be a difficulty with the international Commission. Mr. Adams said the Sinn Fein position on this issue had been stated clearly before St. Patrick's Day last. It was acceptable on the level of principle or as an objective. But to make it a precondition was, as the Tanaiste had properly said, a formula for disaster.

23. The Minister for Social Welfare intervened to underline how dangerous a vacuum would be. It was better to have movement blocked out. The word decommissioning had been found to avoid connotations of surrender. The Commission would not have completed its work by November.

24. Mr. Adams challenged the Minister to say from his own experience whether he thought the IRA would decommission as was being proposed. The Minister for Social Welfare accepted that there was no precedent for decommissioning. However, there was also no precedent for the Republicans to be engaged in negotiations as envisaged at present. Mr. McGuinness suggested the Minister knew well what would happen if there was no movement.
25. Messrs. McGuinness and Adams stressed that they had put their necks on the line. They had factored in some "British ambushes" but the support of Dublin had been crucial, particularly in relation to all-party talks. There had been a series of disappointments in spite of "hype" - the Spring/Mayhew meeting, the Coleraine II speech, which was less than expected, even according to British hype.
26. Mr. O hUiginn pointed out that the work of the Commission could be situated on a spectrum which at one end would be predominantly political. One could imagine that the Commission would, in essence, confirm the pledges we already accepted about the good faith of Sinn Fein on the decommissioning issue. Its work could be clearly on the level of theory and principle in the first instance and not be involved with instalments, inventories, etc. It could offer a way out of the impasse that was honourable and workable for all sides.
27. Mr. Adams said that if Prime Minister Major saw it in that way, then things might be different. No-one wanted guns in circulation, druggies shooting each other etc. Sinn Fein wanted to see total decommissioning. The Taoiseach recalled that the Irish Government were in the midst of negotiations. They wanted to move forward by working towards all-party conference with maximum attendance. They had set out the

difficulties frankly and were looking for help. The proposals were not in the form where every question could be answered. Some of the discussion was inevitably hypothetical. There was a need to work at the proposals and to make the best effort to secure worthwhile progress. He suggested the Government and Sinn Fein might talk again before the end of the week. He asked if the Governments came up with something on these lines at the Summit, would Sinn Fein cooperate.

28. Mr. McGuinness asked whether there would be a fait accompli or consultation? Would the Summit be on the 6th? Mr. Adams said people were watching the Summit as a very decisive step. A fudged Summit would be dangerous. The Tanaiste confirmed that that was not the Irish intention. Mr. Adams said anything which appeared an axis of London and Dublin against the Republicans would be extremely dangerous. He had set out his views on the Commission in his Irish Times article. He would deal privately and not publicly with any further discussions on it. It would be important there should be no briefing points to the media that Sinn Fein were looking at this idea. There was a crisis in the process. At other critical points he had been able to see the way out, but not this time. He was formally asking the Irish Government to adopt the notion of kick-starting talks.
29. The Taoiseach enquired if we agreed to such a Conference to kick-start the talks, could Sinn Fein then approach the IRA. Mr. Adams thought that "bugger off, Gerry", would be the IRA response at present. The Taoiseach said that if the Sinn Fein reaction had been coloured by reference to inventories, etc., that was not a central issue. He asked in what conditions Sinn Fein would recommend cooperation with the Commission to the IRA.

30. Mr. Adams said there were a number of variables. Any position from the Irish Government would be put to the IRA without prejudice, and he would advise on the outcome. He had to say however that he felt the Commission was a non-runner at this time. More generally, it was very difficult to get the IRA to engage on this until substantive political progress had taken place. He recalled the Taoiseach's objections to "parking" the decommissioning issue. If the Irish Government was coming forward with the Commission purely as a way of removing a pre-condition and moving into a new phase, then that might be different.
31. The Taoiseach pointed out the dynamic possibilities of the situation, and that in November either the unionists might be so convinced of Sinn Fein's good faith or Sinn Fein of the prospects of political dialogue that things would have changed. Sinn Fein expressed scepticism.
32. The Minister for Social Welfare asked whether it would help if the Conference took place first and the Commission later. Mr. Adams said that was a hypothetical issue. He accepted that decommissioning had to be dealt with. They were trying to remove the roadblock. The idea of the Commission now would not work, and would not get the cooperation of the IRA. If the British were clearly giving up the instalment, then it could be looked at, but at any time there would be massive difficulty.
33. After further interventions, essentially repeating points already made, the meeting ended with the drafting of a joint statement. (Copy attached).

Sean O hUiginn
Second Secretary
29 August, 1995