



# An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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SECRET

Meeting between Government Leaders and SDLP Delegation,  
Wednesday, 9 April, 1997.

1. Following is a summary report of this meeting, which was held in Government Buildings. A list of those present is attached.
2. Arson Attacks  
Mr. Hume wondered if the attacks were being deliberately organised with a view to making peace impossible. Mr. Mallon referred to the tradition of defenderism on all sides, instancing the White Boys and Peep O'Day Boys. He added that there was no doubt that the Provisionals' violence had contributed very substantially to bringing this tradition back "to the top of the glass".
3. Marching Season  
Mr. Mallon expressed concern at the potential for "absolute mayhem" during the summer.
4. Coalisland and Derryhirk  
Mr. Mallon also expressed concern at the recent incidents as above. On Coalisland, he indicated that, as he understood it, the two individuals apparently involved in the attack had been fitted up by the Provisionals. The latter, it seemed, had been looking for "a couple of dead bodies for Easter". Mr. Mallon added that this was not of course to excuse the behaviour of the security forces in expending such a large number of rounds of ammunition during the incident, especially given the obvious danger to those attending a function in the nearby Heritage Centre. On Derryhirk, Mr. Mallon said that he felt there was something very fishy and wrong about this incident. He referred in support to what he felt had been an attempt by the Provisionals/Sinn Féin to set him up, apparently by trying to rush him into commenting on the incident, without the benefit of having spoken to the two individuals involved.
5. Following a further reference by Mr. Mallon to his belief that the Provisionals had tipped off the security forces in advance of the Coalisland attack, Mr. O'hUiginn commented that this might in part explain Sir

Patrick Mayhew's recent remark to the Tánaiste that the IRA were sending (the British) their marginal, expendable people.

6. Upcoming Elections

Mr. O'hUiginn asked what the Government could do to assist in the current situation, including in light of the upcoming elections. Dr. Hendron in response expressed warm appreciation for what the Taoiseach had said at the press conference held before the meeting: it was "spot on" and the SDLP couldn't have asked for better. Dr. Hendron also expressed concern at Sinn Féin's strategy of community control through control of community bodies - and commented in this connection that Mr. Adams recent visit to Dublin housing estates to address the drugs problem was one of the most frightening things he had seen for some time. He also referred to the apparently total focus of the media on Sinn Féin, helped by young Sinn Féin - type journalists.

7. Mr. McGrady commented that what concerned him most at present about the current spate of arson attacks was the emergence - in place of the pan-Loyalist/pan-Nationalist divide - of a crude "them" and "us" divide. He added that not all of the activists on either side were under paramilitary control and that this in itself was arguably a cause of concern - because where the paramilitaries were involved, there was at least some prospect of control. He also commented that Sinn Féin's overriding objective in the forthcoming election was to secure 51% of the Nationalist vote and that it was imperative that they did not succeed. He remarked on the differing approaches adopted by Sinn Féin in their canvassing depending on the constituency - viz intimidation, as in West Belfast and respectful persuasion (with canvassers being instructed in what to wear and in the importance of closing gates etc.) in his own constituency. He also emphasised the importance of pressing home the message that if people voted for Sinn Féin, they were voting for those with an Armalite in one hand. He added that it was one of the inexplicable things about Northern Ireland that people did not seem to see this. Mr. McGrady expressed confidence that the SDLP would be able to ensure that Sinn Féin did not succeed in gaining a 51% share of the vote.

8. Mr. Hume indicated that he was seriously concerned at the polarising effect of the current high levels of sectarianism - which was beyond anything experienced during the previous 25 years - on young people. In particular, there was a danger of people moving away from the SDLP and towards Sinn Féin, in a reaction against Loyalist extremism. On the

positive side, in terms of countering Republican extremism, there was the concept - which the Taoiseach had referred to at the press conference - of the joint referendum. If this were acted on, it would remove the whole basis for the IRA's existence. It was important therefore to make clear that even in the absence of a peaceful environment, the talks would go ahead with a view to reaching agreement (and the joint referendum being held).

9. Mr. Mallon indicated that, so far as the election was concerned, things were on a knife edge. The indications were that the SDLP's core vote would hold up. However, it was as always virtually impossible to know how the fringe element would vote. Any one incident could turn things in a different direction and the uncertainty would continue up until the week-end before election day.
10. Mr. Hume, in response to a query by the Tánaiste, indicated that the SDLP were doing well in the polls and referred to a recent poll in support.
11. Dr. Hendron said, in support of Mr. Mallon, that it would be disastrous for the SDLP if a decision were taken to release the two British soldiers jailed for the murder of Mr. Peter McBride in 1992. The Tánaiste reassured him that we had not received any indications from the British that this was about to happen. Dr. Hendron also repeated that it was important to press home the message that Sinn Féin was - as he had said in the past - a fascist organisation.
12. Mr. Mallon indicated that he believed that Sinn Féin/the IRA were going to "pull a stunt" around the time of their forthcoming Ard Fheis.
13. *The Multi-Party Talks*  
Mr. Mallon said that he was convinced that, unless the two Governments decided what to do in the talks and how it should be done etc., nothing would be negotiated in them. The two Governments had got to act as the drive shaft and the talks had got to be such that the Unionists and the Provisionals could not afford to be out of them. The Taoiseach indicated that he understood that at the Liaison Group meeting held that day, the British side had indicated a certain degree of openness to looking at a more proactive role for the two Governments. Mr. Hume expressed the hope that a stronger Government would be in a better position to take a more proactive role. He added that the fact that there was no question of imposing a settlement should enable the Governments to adopt a proactive approach.

14. The IRA

Mr. Hume said that he believed that one of the reasons for the August 1994 cessation was that elements in the IRA who had been sucked in as teenagers in 1969/1970 had decided that they did not want their children to follow in their footsteps. However, it seemed that there was a growing Mafia element within the ranks of the IRA. [Mr. Hume also referred to the reluctance to have a split in the IRA]. He acknowledged that this was just instinct on his part and asked if the Government had any information to this effect. The Taoiseach said that we had no evidence of this as such. He commented, however, that the IRA as a whole were a Mafia - type organisation.

15. Mr. Mallon cautioned against the Government's being drawn into a pre-negotiation negotiation on foot of an IRA ceasefire - adding that he doubted that there would in fact be a ceasefire.

16. Mr. Kirwan referred to the possibility of a temporary suspension of violence by the IRA. Mr. Hendron agreed that it was possible that there would be such a suspension - as opposed to a ceasefire. Mr. O'hUiginn pointed out the downside of such a tactic and of any association with it e.g. by talking to Republicans during such a suspension, in that any short-term gains from a suspension would be more than outweighed by the odium which would follow a resumption of violence. He noted that the British had seemed to be open to the idea of a tactical suspension, on the grounds that it might provide a basis for building a lasting ceasefire. He added that we had urged the British to have nothing to do with a tactical suspension.

17. Dr. Hendron said that it appeared from the IRA's Easter messages that they intended to maintain indefinitely their strategy of peace and war. Mr. O'hUiginn said that it needed to be signalled very unambiguously that this was not going to work and that a tactical suspension of violence would not secure entry into the talks.

18. The Minister for Social Welfare commented that notwithstanding the rhetoric about a 32 county socialist republic, the IRA's underlying raison d'etre was as the cutting edge of a 'them' and 'us' Republicanism - there was no real expectation of a 32 county republic and the IRA were not interested in socialism.

19. Mr. de Rossa also suggested that the SDLP might consider having a qualitative opinion survey carried out, with a view to determining what non-core voters wanted.
20. The Tánaiste enquired as to the prospects for the SDLP and UUP teeing things up in advance of 3 June so that, assuming - as seemed likely - a strong Labour Government, speedy progress could be made once the talks resumed. Mr. Hume responded that Unionist attitudes depended on who one was talking to. He also commented on the differing strands of opinion within Unionism generally and contrasted the more pragmatic approach of the business community with the confrontational approach of Dr. Ian Paisley.
21. ***Position of Loyalist Parties***  
The Taoiseach enquired as to how the Loyalist parties were likely to fare in the election. Mr. Mallon responded by referring to the position of those parties in the talks following recent attacks attributed to Loyalists. Mr. Mallon said the Loyalists had broken their ceasefire and had killed people and that it was going to be very, very difficult to ignore this - it was going to be a big problem on 3 June. Mr. Kirwan acknowledged that the Governments were treading on thin ice here. Mr. Hume commented that there was a very strong positive element within Loyalist ranks but there was another element, centred around Mr. Billy Wright, which was trying to stir things up. He also expressed concern that any step to exclude the Loyalist parties from the talks would lead to a multiplication of killings by the Loyalist paramilitaries.
22. ***Next British Government***  
Mr. McGrady expressed concern that a British Labour Government might be overly sympathetic to the Unionist cause. He was particularly concerned that a Labour Government might not uphold the current Government's refusal to send Ministers to the Forum; and that the Forum might in effect be allowed to develop into a devolved administration, thereby negating any need for discussion on Strand One. Mr. Hume, in support, pointed out the significance of this in terms of removing any incentive to discuss the other Strands. He added that the SDLP had no objection in principle to power being devolved to Northern Ireland, so long as it was done the right way.
23. Mr. Hume referred to the misleading impression which events like the Aintree bomb hoax gave to the outside world of the IRA - and the way in

- which they engendered sympathy in the outside world for the Unionist cause. He suggested that consideration might need to be given to organising a campaign to educate people as to the realities of the situation.
24. Mr. O'hUiginn took up Mr. McGrady's reference to his concerns about a British Labour administration and noted that he understood that the British Labour Party was concerned at the relative lack of dialogue they had been able to have with the SDLP to date. He pointed out the advantages for the SDLP of having a sister party in Government and urged that a very serious outreach be made to the BLP in the next couple of weeks. The Tánaiste also urged the SDLP to do whatever needed to be done in this regard. Mr. Mallon indicated that this point was taken.
  25. Discussion continued over dinner, with the Minister for Social Welfare representing the Government [The Taoiseach and the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs had other commitments]. This involved some general discussion on the peace process. In the course of it, Mr. Mallon made a strong plea for the two Governments to put it up to both Unionists and Sinn Féin right from or before the resumption on 3 June either to come into the talks and make progress or to be excluded for at least a certain fixed period ("Are you in, or are you out?"), with the talks going ahead in either event. While Mr. Hume appeared to indicate agreement to this approach, it did not appear to the undersigned that he appreciated the time-lock element. Messrs. McGrady and Hendron were clearly in support of the full Mallon position.
  26. The discussion also covered a number of points of detail. Mr. Hume suggested that it would boost the SDLP's electoral chances if the Government were to announce that they were asking the Dutch Presidency to agree to Northern Ireland's being categorised separately from the rest of the U.K. in terms of its BSE status. The Government side responded that the British Government was bound to oppose this. Mr. Mallon strongly urged the case for IFI support for Corry Square in Newry.
  27. Mr. McGrady raised the issues which he had flagged in advance of the meeting viz. Sellafield; the Hague Preferences in relation to fisheries and the programme of agentisation within the Northern Ireland Civil Service. It was noted that a meeting had been arranged between Mr. McGrady and Minister Emmet Stagg in Sellafield. It was also noted that the Irish Government had been as sympathetic as possible to Northern Ireland fishermen in operating the system of swaps in the Irish sea; and that the

issue of the Hague Preferences was being considered by officials from North and South, operating under the aegis of the AIIC. It was agreed that the issue of agentisation would be pursued via the Joint Secretariat.

Attendance

The Taoiseach, Mr. John Bruton, T.D.,  
The Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr. Dick Spring, T.D.,  
The Minister for Social Welfare, Mr. Proinsias de Rossa, T.D.,  
Mr. S. O'hUiginn, Second Secretary, Department of Foreign Affairs,  
Mr. W. Kirwan, Assistant Secretary, Department of the Taoiseach,  
Mr. S. Donlon, Special Adviser to the Taoiseach,  
Mr. S. Hare, Principal Officer, Department of the Taoiseach.

Mr. John Hume, MP, MEP, SDLP,  
Mr. Seamus Mallon, MP, SDLP,  
Dr. Joe Hendron, MP, SDLP,  
Dr. Eddie McGrady, MP, SDLP.

**Transcript of Press Conference  
the Taoiseach and Members of the SDLP  
on the steps of Government Buildings.  
on Wednesday 9th April 1997**

**Taoiseach:**

I would like to start this Press Conference by welcoming the delegation from the SDLP again to Government Buildings. This is a meeting that is part of a regular series of meetings that we have with the SDLP. The meeting has commenced but we will be entering into the substance in a few minutes when we return upstairs. I would like to avail of this opportunity to condemn the recent IRA attacks and hoaxes in Britain, which have done a great deal of damage to their cause and which have made life very difficult for all the people effected, but particularly for Irish people.

I also again, as I did on the 23rd of March in the Dáil, condemn the Loyalist murder of John Slane and also the attack on Eddie Copeland and the recent assassination attempt on Kieran Delaney. But I also have to express my concern about the ambiguous events at Derryhirk and in Coalisland which is a matter of some concern. I would also like to strongly condemn, on behalf of the Government, and on behalf of all people who believe in the freedom to worship, which is one of the fundamentals of the respect for human rights, the recent arson attacks on places of worship and particularly on Catholic Churches, but not exclusively on Catholic Churches. These attacks are totally contrary to any concept of freedom or any concept of respect and they represent a degradation on the part of the people concerned, which is a matter of grave concern.

I also would like to say how much I welcome the presence of the SDLP here on this occasions. The SDLP is a party that has adhered, with great courage and consistency, to an exclusively democratic approach to politics. It has pioneered the idea that agreement is possible and it has worked tirelessly under the leadership of John Hume for an agreement between the peoples who live on this island. The watch word of the SDLP at all times has been agreement, and agreement based on consent, and it has in particular pioneered the idea that we would have simultaneous consultations, but separate consultations, with the

people in Northern Ireland and with the people of the Republic on the content of any agreement so that it would be seen to be endorsed both by the people of Northern Ireland and also by the people of the whole island, so that simultaneously the concerns of both communities, as to the process of agreement, would be met. The concerns of the Unionists would be met by the agreement having to be separately agreed in Northern Ireland, but the concerns of the Nationalists, who look at the matter in an all Ireland context, will be met by the fact that it would be agreed in both Northern Ireland and the Republic and that constant pursuit of agreement has been the hallmark of the work of the SDLP and it is something which I think people who wish to see progress must continue to support, in every way possible.

**John Hume:**

Thank you very much Taoiseach and obviously we very much welcome today's meeting. It's a regular meeting. We have met regularly with the Government and the purpose of our meeting of course is to update the Government on the current situation as we see it. And of course the Taoiseach has rightly drawn attention to some recent very, very nasty and terrible events on the ground, the killing of innocent human beings, the burning down of Churches. It's quite evident that there are extremes on both sides who are intent in trying to whip up strong sectarian feeling in Northern Ireland, but it would be our view that it's the wish of the vast majority of the people that that feeling does not get expression, because we know that all it leads to in the end is conflict.

And of course we are here as I say to update the Taoiseach on the current situation and we are very hopeful that in the aftermath of these elections that there will be a strong Government in London and that therefore we will continue with - because we know your Government is totally committed and has shown itself to be totally committed to the talks and dialogue process - and that we will continue with that in a much more positive vein if we have a strong London Government, and concentrate on the central issues of the dialogue, which are the three sets of relationships and work to achieve agreement and concentrate agreement and as you have said put that agreement then to the people North and South on the one day. That would be the first time in our history that we had agreed institutions that would have the loyalty of all sections of the people and we look forward to continuing to working with you in order to bring that about.

**Question:**

Taoiseach .... is a vote for Sinn Fein ... a vote in support of the "armed struggle" as the IRA call it?

**Taoiseach:**

Currently Sinn Fein is part of a movement, which also consists of another element which is the IRA, and the IRA is engaged in a campaign of violence which includes the killing of people to pursue a political objective. Political support for Sinn Fein is support for that campaign.

**John Hume:**

There is absolutely no doubt if you are a voter on the ground in Northern Ireland, and it's an insult to the intelligence of any voter in Northern Ireland to tell them that by voting Sinn Fein they are not voting for violence, because everybody knows that Sinn Fein and the IRA belong to the one movement. As long as they are committed to what they call "armed struggle", a vote for them is a vote for that strategy. It's ordinary common sense, as we keep repeating, that given that our problem is that we are a divided people in this island, all that violence and killing does is make the problem worse by deepening the divisions and the bitterness, it therefore has no contribution to make to solving the problem. It only makes it much worse and for that very reason, we are convinced, that the grass roots right across the North, in this election, who are the most highly politicised people, in my opinion, in Europe, know exactly what they will be voting for and a massive wish for peace will be translated by voting for real peace in this election.

**Question:**

Taoiseach could I ask you, I don't think you actually answered strictly this gents question. What he said is a vote for Sinn Fein a vote for the IRA, do you believe it is?

**Taoiseach:**

A vote for Sinn Fein is a vote of support for the IRA and the IRA's campaign of killing and murder.

**Question:**

Do you believe the speculation over the past couple of weeks about an IRA ceasefire, do any of you know anything about it, do you believe it possible?

**John Hume:**

Well I certainly wish there was. I mean we all want to see and the SDLP throughout it's existence has been in the front line against violence. We want to see a total and absolute end to violence as soon as possible, because as long as it goes on the danger every day is that we are going to have another atrocity,

and then that atrocity would lead to major atrocities on the Loyalist side and then we are in a far worse situation. So the sooner the better, but, I have no evidence of any description to suggest that we are approaching a ceasefire.

**Question:**

In the context of the question .... I understand that Seamus Mallon expressed a view earlier on today .... about Albert Reynolds' recent visit to West Belfast ....

**Seamus Mallon:**

Well I welcome the opportunity. It's a very difficult situation in West Belfast. As a former Taoiseach, Mr. Reynolds knows the difficulties, he knows the sensitivities, he knows what is at stake, he knows there is an election campaign on and I would have thought he would have known better.

**Question:**

But certainly at some stage, you are going to have to do business surely with Sinn Fein in the future and by saying what you are saying tonight it's not going to make it any easier in the end, is it?

**John Hume:**

Nobody has shown themselves willing or more willing to do business with everyone in Northern Ireland. We are the party of dialogue, we have talked to every single party in Northern Ireland. We have talked to the Loyalists as well, because we think that dialogue is obviously a lot better than using guns or bombs and in using our influence to persuade people to stop using violence. Don't be under any illusions, the SDLP have stood on the front line against all violence, and our homes have been attacked from all sides as well, and we are quite willing to enter into dialogue with anyone, if the objective is to bring an end to violence. We made clear throughout, that the objective of our dialogue was a total end to violence, followed by all-party dialogue whose objective was agreement, and that the agreement would have to have the consent and allegiance of all sections of our community. So there is nothing new about our position.

**Seamus Mallon:**

Could I add to that, less we forget, that peace is one of the most fundamental of human rights, and the freedom to live in peace without threat of violence is a fundamental human right, not to be bartered at election time, not to be used for election purposes. It is the right of every single person in the North of Ireland and on the whole of this island. That's not a right that can be doled out by Sinn Fein, the IRA or any organisation, it is a fundamental human right and to use it

political terms, for political expediency is something which is trampling on the fundamental human rights of everyone.

**Taoiseach:**

I was simply going to respond to your question. Your question was whether you believed it was appropriate, if we had to ultimately talk to Sinn Fein, for us to point out that Sinn Fein is part of the one movement with the IRA and that a vote for Sinn Fein is support for the IRA. My answer to that is, that's the truth, and the cause of peace is never served by failing to tell the truth, or engaging in hypocrisy. It would be hypocrisy to pretend that a vote for Sinn Fein is anything other than a vote of support for the IRA, because they are part of the one movement, they admit that themselves, they are part of the one movement and the people who exercise their right to support them must also understand what they are doing, and I think it would be doing no service to fail to tell the truth in this area.

**Questions:**

Taoiseach have you lost your patience with Sinn Fein?

**Taoiseach:**

I believe that I have lost patience, as everybody else who is concerned about a democratic, settlement and an agreed approach has, with the Republican Movements procrastination. They have had, since the 10th of June, an opportunity which they have been looking for for years and years, of sitting down at the same table with all of the parties. Instead of taking up that opportunity by having an IRA ceasefire in good time before the 10th of June, they failed to take it up, and they staged a meaningless demonstration at the gates rather than being where they should have been, in their places taking part in the talks. The only reason they weren't there was because they hadn't the courage to call a ceasefire.

**John Hume:**

Could I say rather than waiting to respond to statements from British politicians, in order to end violence if they truly believe in the self-determination of the Irish people, they should respond to the will of the Irish people as a whole, which is very clear, not only within Ireland North and South but the Irish abroad, they want a total and absolute end to violence.

**Question:**

Can I ask you if you still believe there is an opportunity ....Patrick Mayhew ... seems to be suggesting the reverse ... that there is still an opportunity, as Taoiseach, you indicated earlier for Sinn Fein to participate in the talks when they resume, if a ceasefire was declared now or soon, or is that opportunity slipping away?

**Taoiseach:**

I think that opportunity just about still exists, but every time the IRA engage in a further action the more difficult they make it for others to believe that a ceasefire that might be called afterwards is truly unequivocal. Because every act of violence is also an act of equivocation in terms of commitment to peace in any subsequent ceasefire. It creates equivocation, the act of violence itself, so it's very important that the Republican Movement should realise that they will be judged in terms of the ground rules for participation in the talks, not just by their words and particularly words that are issued very late, but also by their deeds, and the deeds that are currently being undertaken obviously have to be weighed up, in coming to the judgement that has to be made. But yes is the answer to your original question, yes, there is still time, but they would want to realise that that time is running out, the ceasefire would want to come soon.

**Thank you.**

**ENDS.**