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FROM: JONATHAN STEPHENS
10 May 1995

- cc PS/Michael Ancram (B&L) - B
- PS/Sir John Wheeler (B&L) - B
- PS/PUS (B&L) - B
- PS/Mr Fell - B
- Mr Legge - B
- Mr Thomas - B
- Mr Bell - B
- Mr Brooke - B
- Mr Daniell - B
- Mr Leach - B
- Mr Shannon - B
- Mr Steele - B
- Mr Watkins - B
- Mr Williams - B
- Mr Wood (B&L) - B
- Mr Brooker - B
- Mrs Brown - B
- Mr Dodds - B
- Mr Maccabe - B
- Mr Marsh - B
- Mr Perry - B
- Mr Smyth - B
- Mr Stephens - B
- Mr Bramley, SIL - B
- Mr Beeton, TPU - B
- Mr Lindsay, PAB - B
- Mr R Lyne, No 10 - Fax
- Mr P Lever, Cabinet Office - Fax
- Mr Cassell, MOD - Fax
- Mr Warne, HO - Fax
- Mr Lamont, RID - B
- HMA, Dublin - B
- HMA, Washington - Fax

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Fell

~~cc Mr Maxwell~~ Mrs Keeney
Mrs Dunlop LDIAs

PS/SECRETARY OF STATE (B&L) - B

EXPLORATORY DIALOGUE WITH SINN FEIN, 10 MAY: SUMMARY NOTE

This note provides a brief initial summary account of today's meeting of exploratory dialogue with Sinn Fein, in which the Government side was for the first time led by a Minister, Michael Ancram. After initial introductions and handshakes, the meeting began at 1135 and continued, with two recesses of about 20 minutes, until about 1530.

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Summary

2. Frank, hard hitting exchanges. Michael Ancram explained why substantial progress on the issue of decommissioning was essential. Sinn Fein repeated their commitment to the principle of removing all guns from Irish politics. Mr McGuinness took a Government paper on modalities of decommissioning, and agreed to consider it.

3. Mr McGuinness repeated demands for equality of treatment with other parties. He refused to agree a date for a further meeting with Michael Ancram, insisting on a response to his formal request for a meeting between the Secretary of State and Mr Adams as part of the round of bilaterals with the other main parties. Demilitarisation and prisons were also briefly touched upon.

Detail

4. Mr McGuinness opened with Shakespeare: "once more into the breach ...". Michael Ancram said that he welcomed the meeting and would approach it with a positive spirit: both sides had a common goal in a lasting peace and an agreed political settlement.

5. Mr McGuinness then read Sinn Fein's opening statement, which emphasised their demand for equality of treatment with the other main parties, and Michael Ancram read the Government's, which emphasised the importance of substantial progress on the issue of decommissioning as well as the breadth of the agenda that was possible in exploratory dialogue. (Both opening statements have been separately circulated.)

6. In response to a suggestion from Michael Ancram that discussion should now move to decommissioning of arms, Mr McGuinness asked why this should take priority: it had never featured before 31 August 1994. Michael Ancram explained: it was part of meeting the requirements of paragraph 10 of the Downing Street Declaration; it was also a matter of political reality that there would be no round table talks without addressing the issue. The Taoiseach had made this very clear in the Dail recently.

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7. In a lengthy preliminary discussion, Mr McGuinness made the following points:

- Sinn Fein were wholly committed to the removal of all guns, including IRA guns;
- the IRA had taken an enormous step in declaring its cessation of violence but his judgement was that there was no possibility of the IRA handing over weapons now, or handing them over unilaterally at any stage. Indeed, if it had been clear that this was a pre-condition to progress, there most likely would have been no IRA ceasefire;
- Sinn Fein had no arms. It would be unrealistic to expect Sinn Fein to bring about the IRA's surrender. They simply could not deliver that. It was in the context of a negotiated settlement that the issue of arms would be solved;
- he now had serious doubts about the Government's resolve to move the process forward. Decommissioning was being used as a stalling tactic and as an excuse for denying Sinn Fein equality of treatment. The Republican leadership had put their necks on the line and taken significantly more risks than anyone else. They feared the Government now wanted to hang them out to dry;
- he sincerely wanted Sinn Fein to play its part in resolving the issue, but Sinn Fein could not do it on its own. It required the Government to join the process and to treat Sinn Fein on the same basis as other parties. Why were the same questions not being asked of Dr Paisley and his relationship with the armed Ulster Resistance?

8. In response, Michael Ancram and others made the following points:

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- decommissioning was not a hurdle which the Government was seeking to erect. It was accepted as an important issue by all the other parties and by the Irish Government;
- the practical reality was that most of the other parties would not sit down with Sinn Fein until substantial progress on the issue was made;
- we recognised this was an extremely difficult issue and did not expect to solve it overnight. We wanted to create the conditions in which parallel progress on a number of relevant and key issues became possible;
- we were not seeking the IRA's surrender but the issue could not be ducked. We wanted to make progress in a number of parallel areas, including further de-escalatory measures and political progress, but part of this process had to be progress on decommissioning;
- we wanted to move as quickly as possible to inclusive talks, but we could not force parties to the table if they did not want to come. There was no point in convening one-sided talks, so they required confidence on the part of all parties that all were approaching the table on the basis of their electoral mandates alone;
- we did not have a single-issue agenda. We were happy to talk about other issues including 'Frameworks' - itself a clear demonstration of the Government's commitment, even at some risk, to providing impetus to the political process.

9. At Michael Ancram's suggestion, the discussion then turned to the modalities of decommissioning. Michael Ancram ran through the possibilities on verification, independent supervision, methods and legal and practical considerations, emphasising that the Government had an open mind on such issues as the involvement of third parties and the establishment of a Commission, reporting to both

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Governments, if necessary with overseas representation. Mr Thomas emphasised the benefit of agreement on modalities, without necessarily a commitment as to timing, as itself a valuable confidence building measure.

10. Mr McGuinness said that Sinn Fein had given no detailed consideration to these sorts of issues. Their position was that if the right political conditions were created in which the relevant organisations had the confidence to decommission arms, then the logistics of the process would be a very simple matter to agree. He agreed to accept a Government paper on the issue, which was then handed over, and undertook to consider it personally.

11. After a recess, Mr McManus raised the issue of demilitarisation and handed over a Sinn Fein paper, stressing the lack of the Government's response to the ceasefire and the need to make progress on the removal of all guns, the disbandment of the RUC and the withdrawal of the Army.

12. Michael Ancram said that he could accept no equivalence between the legitimate forces of law and order and terrorist organisations. It had always been the Government's position that the level of security was commensurate with the perceived risk. It had not been the Government which had militarised the problem or which had declared that military means could bring about a political solution. Nevertheless, the progress already made in establishing peace had enabled a number of significant de-escalatory measures to be taken and the longer peace continued, and the firmer it became established, then the more that response would continue to develop.

13. Mr McGuinness said the Government's response so far had been minimalist and inconsistent: why, if peace justified no routine patrolling in Belfast, was there still Army patrolling in South Armagh and East Tyrone? This was not at all helpful to the peace process.

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14. Mr McGuinness briefly asked about prisoners, but Michael Ancram said that this was an important subject in its own right which merited a full discussion which the Government would be happy to hold.

15. Turning to the final issue Sinn Fein had flagged up, Mr McGuinness repeated their demand for equality of treatment with the other main parties. They had watched with concern yesterday's discussion between the Secretary of State and the UUP and Mr Molyneaux's claim that he had received assurances that these were entirely separate discussions to those in which Sinn Fein were participating. Sinn Fein had repeatedly requested a meeting between Mr Adams and the Secretary of State to discuss the peace process, but had never even received the courtesy of a reply. He wished formally to repeat that request again.

16. Michael Ancram said that, after yesterday's meeting, Mr Molyneaux had appeared to suggest that he would be meeting an entirely separate Ministerial and official team to that meeting Sinn Fein. In fact, the Secretary of State had made it clear that meetings would involve whoever was the relevant Minister and any other impression was wrong. The Government recognised Sinn Fein's electoral mandate, as demonstrated by his presence in these exploratory talks in which Sinn Fein could raise any issue direct with Ministers. As part of this dialogue, and on condition that it continued, the Government would be prepared to normalise contact with Sinn Fein and to consider requests for meetings between Sinn Fein representatives and Ministers on their merits and on the same basis as other requests. That did not mean that all requests would automatically be agreed and the Government remained of the view that exploratory dialogue, itself with a very wide agenda, would continue to provide the focus for contacts.

17. Mr McGuinness said that development was welcome but no compensation for Sinn Fein being consigned to a second track of the political process. Michael Ancram repeated what was necessary for Sinn Fein to move beyond the exploratory phase into substantive bilaterals.

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18. After a further recess, Michael Ancram offered three dates for a meeting next week and suggested that, over the course of future meetings, it would be helpful to cover prisons, the ground rules for political talks, policing, Irish language, economic and social issues and criminal justice.

19. Mr McGuinness neither agreed to, nor rejected, a future meeting with Michael Ancram saying that he would await a response to his formal request for a meeting between the Secretary of State and Mr Adams. As a result of the Secretary of State's announcement of bilaterals with the other main parties, the process had now moved on and Sinn Fein was not prepared to collude in being consigned to second class status. Although Mr Adams was currently in the USA, Sinn Fein representatives would be available to meet the Secretary of State whenever he issued an invite.

Atmosphere

20. Frank, hard hitting exchanges dominated, on the Sinn Fein side, almost exclusively by Mr McGuinness. Sinn Fein now appear to be impaling themselves on a further hook, insisting that only a meeting with the Secretary of State will satisfy them.

(Signed)

JONATHAN STEPHENS

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