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RECORD OF THE IGC RESTRICTED POLITICAL SESSION: LONDON: 22 MAY 1996

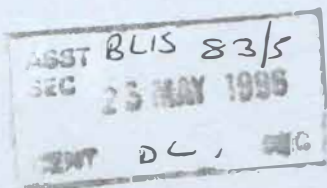
Those Present:

British Side

Irish Side

Secretary of State  
Michael Ancram  
Sir John Wheeler  
PUS  
Sir David Fell  
Mr Thomas  
Mr Legge  
Mr Leach  
Mr Bell  
Ms Checksfield  
Mr Lamont, RID  
HMA Dublin  
Mr Howard - Note-taker

Tanaiste  
Mrs Owen  
Mr McKiernan  
Mr Dalton  
Mr O'hUguinn  
Mr Donoghue  
Mr Barrington  
Mr Cooney  
Mr Finlay



Summary

A friendly meeting, but one which failed to bridge the gap between the British insistence that the Mitchell compromise really meant a compromise and that accordingly some decommissioning would have to happen during the course of negotiations, and the Irish belief that decommissioning during negotiations should be an aspiration and one which might be achieved if the circumstances were right but that commitment to it in advance would put paid to any chance of a ceasefire and the presence of Sinn Fein at the talks. The argument revolved around this basic point for approximately 90 minutes with no resolution being reached. There was accordingly little discussion of other matters such as the agenda and the question of Chairmanships. The British side pressed hard for a further meeting at Ministerial level next week. Obvious reluctance from the Tanaiste but not an outright refusal. Both sides played down their differences at the subsequent press conferences.

Detail

2. The Secretary of State opened the meeting by saying that the question of decommissioning was the most important business for that day's IGC. There was a good deal of common ground between the two Governments. Both believed in the need for an absolute commitment

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the six Mitchell principles by the participants. Both believed that there needed to be a substantial engagement on decommissioning before the end of the Plenary. There was agreement on the concept of George Mitchell being Chairman of the Plenary. Both agreed that decommissioning would need to be dealt with by a sub-Committee of the Plenary involving all the parties. And there was broad agreement on the need for and the nature of, procedural rules. The British Government adhered fully to the Mitchell report and in particular to the compromise set out in paragraphs 34 and 35, ie the concept of decommissioning happening during negotiations rather than before or after. It was relevant to note that that part of the Mitchell report was actually entitled "Decommissioning during all-party negotiations". It seemed to the British Government that George Mitchell should be given the opportunity, as Chairman of the Plenary stage of the negotiations, to secure agreement to his compromise.

3. Continuing, the Secretary of State said that this was a matter of practical politics. The Prime Minister had said on 21 March that there had to be parallel decommissioning and it was not feasible for the Government to move from that position. The political scene in GB in recent days had illustrated the difficulties. We therefore believed that there would have to be agreement to the Mitchell compromise during the Plenary before the sub-Committee was set up to sort out the precise modalities. The Secretary of State said that we recognised that the Irish Government had a different view. He also recognised the great importance of securing another ceasefire and the dire consequences if that were not forthcoming.

4. The Tanaiste agreed that this was an extremely important issue. It was vital to reach a clear understanding about what would happen on 10 June which was only 19 days away. The Irish Government wanted negotiations to be inclusive and they had welcomed the recent Sinn Fein statements which implied acceptance of the six Mitchell principles. They had no knowledge of the likelihood of a ceasefire. The problem for Sinn Fein was that they might effectively be presented with a choice between an undeliverable pre-condition and expulsion or exclusion from the talks. The Irish

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Government supported the Prime Minister's objective, as set out in his Irish Times article, of addressing the Mitchell proposals on decommissioning without creating a blockage. The February Communique said that elections would lead directly to negotiations but this looked very difficult unless this particular issue was solved. It needed to be resolved sooner rather than later. As time passed a ceasefire became less likely.

5. The Secretary of State said that this was indeed the nub of the problem. Both Governments had turned to George Mitchell to remove the earlier blockage over prior decommissioning and his compromise had been intended to achieve this. It was quite clear to the British Government that there needed to be agreement to some decommissioning happening during negotiations before the issue could be remitted to a sub-Committee. Both Governments ought to be able to sign up to this, based as it was upon the Mitchell report. It was not possible to fudge things. If we could not agree then we would have to say so. The Secretary of State thought it was unlikely that we would be able to agree on language today.

6. The Tanaiste said that the Irish Government supported parallel decommissioning but that he thought it would be wrong for negotiations to be hostage to it. He agreed totally with the idea that there should be no fudging of the issue. Sinn Fein would not participate if they thought that on Day one or two of the talks David Trimble could call things to a halt by insisting that physical decommissioning had to start. On the other hand if decommissioning were under discussion while negotiations proceeded this might work. Parallel decommissioning, if any, had to happen in the context of negotiations. The same argument of course applied to the loyalists.

7. Michael Ancram said that the essence of the Mitchell compromise was that the British Government and the unionists would give up their earlier insistence on prior decommissioning if Sinn Fein gave up their insistence on decommissioning only happening after negotiations had completed. It was no compromise at all if we and the unionists gave up the idea of prior decommissioning, which we

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ould have done if negotiations had started, if at that time all Sinn Fein were being asked to do was to consider the possibility of parallel decommissioning. This simply was not saleable. It would prevent any move from the plenary session into detailed negotiations. The Tanaiste said that he was trying to understand our position, but the reality was that if there were not serious negotiations Sinn Fein would not be there. They would not be prepared to go into a situation where Trimble had the right either to pull out or seek Sinn Fein's expulsion.

8. The Secretary of State said that we had promised serious negotiations on an open agenda to meet everyone's concerns. That was in the 28 February Communique. The negotiations that would run in parallel with decommissioning would have to be of that character. It was also important to look very carefully at what David Trimble was actually saying. It was quite clear that he was trying to avoid being painted into a corner. The most he had said was that decommissioning should be happening in weeks rather than months.

9. Sean O'hUiginn asked whether the British believed that Sinn Fein could promise decommissioning upfront. If Sinn Fein could not deliver this how did the scenario unfold? The Secretary of State said that he did not know what Sinn Fein could deliver. They wished to take the gun out of politics and they wanted talks. These were on offer. If they could not participate on the basis of parallel decommissioning, it was no less a reality that HMG could not move from it. Michael Ancram said that we were not saying that we needed to see physical decommissioning at the beginning. But what we did need was acceptance of parallel decommissioning. He repeated that the approach suggested by the Irish Government meant HMG and the unionists giving up prior decommissioning in exchange merely for the possibility of parallel decommissioning. This would not work.

10. The discussion went on in this vein for some time, with the debate on the meaning of the Mitchell report reaching theological dimensions at times. The key points that arose from this discussion were as follows:

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a. Mitchell had made it quite clear in his report, and subsequently, what was the nature of the compromise he proposed. What we needed to do was to create space at the beginning for him to deliver his own proposal. This did not mean that George Mitchell could have absolute control over what happened. That was not feasible in a negotiation involving freely elected representatives. But he had the moral authority and the skill to have a reasonable chance of persuading those participating to agree to his compromise.

b. Mitchell clearly thought that achieving the compromise was a practical possibility - paragraph 25 of his report said that there was a commitment to decommissioning but not before the start of negotiations.

*Spinn speech 2 wks ago  
argued the decommissioning  
had to be treated  
differently because  
it was different  
in quality from 5.1-3.*

Michael Ancram asked whether the Irish Government believed that the Mitchell report was undeliverable. This was not answered directly. In their view, the question of decommissioning was being treated differently from other parts of the negotiation and was therefore becoming a pre-condition. They believed George Mitchell intended that the parties should engage in a process where parallel decommissioning was considered. In the end what the Irish Government was trying to do was to get a ceasefire. The British Government was making decommissioning a conspicuous exception which would be counter-intuitive to republicans.

d. The Irish Government believed that resolution of this issue meant the difference between peace or war. The British Government repeated again that Mitchell himself thought the compromise was logical and achievable. He had said it in January and he had said it again on 4 May - this time after the ceasefire had broken down

e. As with the question of prior decommissioning, the concept of parallel decommissioning was all to do with confidence. If Sinn Fein were saying that there could be no decommissioning

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until the end it would not be possible to make a bridge to achieve that confidence. On the other hand, Mitchell had thought that he could do it. The concept of parallel decommissioning presumed progress on both fronts.

f. In the Irish Government's view, there was a cultural difference between the two islands. The Irish believed that the republican movement were on a journey and should be encouraged to continue it. The British simply saw a threat that had to be crushed. If that analysis was correct then the basis underlying the peace process was a bridge too far. If it fell apart now, it could contaminate republican thinking for a generation, as had happened during the 1970s.

g. On the other hand republicans were not the only ones who had been on a journey. Unionists had started out by saying they would not talk to Sinn Fein unless there had been complete decommissioning. They had then shifted to the idea of some decommissioning taking place before the start of talks and were now prepared to live with the idea of parallel decommissioning.

h. No one would accept Sinn Fein signing up to the Mitchell principles without evidence of their being honoured. There was a complete mutual lack of trust between the British Government and the republicans.

i. On the other hand, one should not underestimate the significance of Sinn Fein explicitly signing up to the six Mitchell principles.

j. The logical consequence of the British position was that it was not possible for negotiations to begin unless there was a ceasefire and decommissioning. This was too high a hurdle and we ought to start to recognise this. The Irish believed a ceasefire was enough. Negotiations that ended in accusatio of bad faith and acrimony were worse than anything. This

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particular thesis was strongly denied by the Secretary of State. He pointed the Irish Government back to what had been said in the Downing Street Declaration about the need for those participating in negotiations to be wholly committed to peaceful and democratic methods. The prize was not simply a ceasefire. The prize was a settlement deriving from inclusive talks.

k. The British approach might be regarded as a "pre-talks process". There was something in this, though it was not a sensible line to take in public. But at least everyone would be at the table.

11. The discussion was brought to a halt by mutual agreement between the Secretary of State and the Tanaiste saying that it would not be possible to reach agreement on language tonight. The Secretary of State thought there was a good case for the two Ministers' meeting again next week. The Tanaiste evinced reluctance but agreed in the end that we should look at diaries (now likely to be on Tuesday 28 May). There was little point in having a Liaison Group in advance as the crucial issue was one that would need to be settled at the political level. The meeting ended with a brief discussion about the press lines and, finally, a worry expressed by the Tanaiste that we could be going into talks on 10 June without agreement on how they were to be handled. The Secretary of State said that at least we would be there, though it was not clear who else would be.

12. The press conferences went reasonably well with the Irish doing their best to play down the differences between the two Governments.

Comment

13. Despite the failure of the two sides to reach an accord on this issue, the tone of the meeting was extremely friendly. Both sides spelt out their position very clearly and there seemed to be wide recognition that we were approaching a crunch point. David Trimble continues to enjoy demonic status on the Irish side, being mentioned by name more frequently than any other player in this particular game.

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