

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

DECLASSIFIED
PER E.O. 13526

2016-0375-M (1.15)
KBH 7/31/2019

MEMORANDUM OF TELEPHONE CONVERSATION

SUBJECT: Telcon with Gerry Adams, Leader of Sinn Fein
(U)

PARTICIPANTS: The President
Gerry Adams

Notetakers: Bonnie Glick, Joel Schrader,
Liz Rogers, George Chastain, Jim Smith and
Lawrence Butler

DATE, TIME August 28, 1998, 4:36 - 5:13 p.m. EDT
AND PLACE: Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts

The President: Hello, Gerry? (U)

The President: Hi, it's Bill Clinton. How are you? (U)

Mr. Adams: I'm sorry. I didn't recognize your voice. (U)

The President: I'll be there Thursday, and I'm looking forward
to seeing you. I have to go to Russia first, so I'll be glad to
get there. (U)

Mr. Adams: Yes, I just watched the news tonight. (U)

The President: I just wanted to talk to you about how I can
contribute when I get there. The incident at Omagh has only
redoubled my determination. I know the proposal Ahern and Blair
have suggested to you, and I think the real problem is
decommissioning. (C)

Let me just say one thing: I know I'm an outsider, but it seems
what you said after Omagh, and the nearly unanimous revulsion
over it, has strengthened your hand and has made objections to a
direct meeting between you and Trimble seem smaller. One
conversation I had with Tony Blair, I don't know if it means
anything to you or changes the politics, is that he said that

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Reason: 1.5(b,d)

Declassify On: 8/31/08

anything de Chastelain would say, whatever the words are, is that substantial decommissioning or a good opening gesture would qualify. It doesn't have to mean turning guns over. Exploding an "X" amount of Semtex, or having some fuses destroyed in his presence would be enough, in the absence of handing over weapons early. Then we could get you into the executive committee without Trimble losing his leadership position, because our reading is that they will throw him out without a gesture from you on decommissioning. (X)

Maybe on Thursday when I am there we could have the meeting between you and Trimble, if that is appealing to you. I don't know that you could ever have a better time or that we could make a better deal. (X)

Mr. Adams: Let me first say that in terms of the steps that Taoiseach and Tony Blair are working on, we have cooperated with them, and have made positive suggestions related to this. The one thing we cannot deliver is IRA decommissioning. (X)

Mr. Adams: Did you hear my dog in the background? (U)

The President: Yes. I have one, too. (U)

Mr. Adams: He hasn't seen me in a while. He's at the window shouting. (U)

I've told Bertie and Tony this, and we battled back and forth on this. What we're going to do from the Sinn Fein perspective is put Martin McGuinness to deal with the international body on decommissioning. Martin will be meeting with de Chastelain this week. What we can do is to use our influence. We'll certainly do that. But I can tell you I'd be misleading you if I said anything else. It's impossible, just impossible to get the IRA to decommission anything. (X)

Secondly, and this is in terms of where I'm coming from, we signed up for the Good Friday agreement, and you and I spoke on this, and we did this in good faith. We turned the organization around, worked and campaigned on the referendum, and then we fought the elections, and for the implementation, and all of that. This is almost just a renegotiation. David Trimble should be meeting with me anyway. This is the decent, polite, cordial, leaderly thing to do. (X)

It's been almost four-to-five years since the first visa you gave me, either in 1993 or 1994, I forget. If it was in my gift

to do any more than I'm doing, I'd do it. We're still all the time trying to move it forward. I understand the awfulness in Omagh. I don't want to see it again. I hope it doesn't happen again. This whole business with the IRA having to give up weapons, they just won't do it. If it were possible to do this by subterfuge or deceit, we'd end up with two to three dissident groups, instead of remnants of one. That is what it's all about. We certainly will work with the international body if it works out some ingenious plan. (C)

The President: Aren't you going to have to do something on this sooner or later? (C)

Mr. Adams: What we are committed to do on this is to use our influence to bring it about, but in a two-year span. David Trimble has yet to say a word to me. It doesn't matter, but of course you want to make friends, political partnerships with somebody, and I want to show the guy that our politics can be better. (C)

The fact is that people are not being given their place, and the silliness is this: the UUP met with the Sinn Fein party and the business community and the Assembly, met with us, and senior members of the leadership of all the other parties, including Sinn Fein. It's just the Unionists. I understand David Trimble has problems, but I cannot solve his problems. (C)

It's about quality, righting wrongs, giving people a place on their own terms. It's about giving Unionists, as well as ourselves, a say. Now four or five years on, after decades of conflicts, to have this silliness raised again. I tell you, in my view, what I saw on the streets in Omagh, all those people wanted politicians to talk, to come together and be honest in their dialogue. This is going against the tide of what I believe most people want. That's the big difficulty. (C)

The IRA wasn't defeated in August 1994. It's unrealistic to expect it, or for me to undermine my own position; and get it to do what it wouldn't do under Major. All the other stuff is within Sinn Fein's gift to negotiate and sign the agreement, but the one of getting the IRA to decommission is impossible. (C)

This repressive legislation, you know, all that stuff on the back of the bombing in Omagh, the killings in Omagh, is causing all kinds of difficulties. I think the government's intentions are okay, but I don't know what a change of administration would bring, or even implementation by "securi-crats." I think the

government is very conscious of that, because they're talking about it very specifically, and they know it runs against human rights charters and the human rights elements of the agreement. I've told Tony this, and Bertie knows it anyway. He has a historical and political sense of this. I also think in terms of Trimble, that he knows it as well. I know that in his heart of hearts he doesn't want this thing to break down. But what happens in any political system is that people talk. (C)

The President: I just don't know how we get over an issue I thought we dealt with in a way that allowed the political process to flow, trust to be developed, and accommodations to be explored. I'm quite prepared to take as many risks as necessary, but the realpolitik is that you can only do what you can do. That is my clear understanding of the situation. I tried painfully, but it isn't going to go. (C)

What I don't understand is that they must have some obsolete weapons. The political position of the Sinn Fein and the supporters within the IRA of the peace process would be dramatically strengthened, not only in Northern Ireland, but also in the rest of the world. If you immediately got into the executive branch, and before that have a person-to-person meeting. I agree with you, I've never understood the significance of the person-to-person meeting, but like it or not, it would be viewed as a big victory for you. (C)

Mr. Adams: The difficulty is that the Good Friday agreement gives the IRA, along with all the other parties, certain entitlements, but more important than that, it gives those we represent, including those most discriminated against and excluded in the last 70-80 years, it would give all those people the very things we are now talking about, a place in the Assembly, and if we got a big enough mandate, a seat in the executive. We turned our organization upside down, we called an extraordinary party conference, and we ran the length of this country knocking heads and cajoling. We brought a huge amount of people with us. We got a very substantial vote. Sinn Fein was the only party that increased its vote in the elections. (C)

The President: Yes, you did very well. (C)

Mr. Adams: We've cleared all the hurdles, and Mr. Blair, as well as the Taoiseach, can see this clearly. They've explained, and I understand that, without the Unionists, there's not much possibility of progress. But as far as the agreement, the sense

of justice and equality, is concerned, the people we represent deserve to have positions in the government, as we talked to and listened to representatives from the other parties. (C)

See, let me tell you things that, obviously from your understanding and your involvement, you're very clear about. This conflict arises from the absence of justice, and in terms of bringing about justice, and all the people live free from British rule. I'm committed to working at it peacefully. I have to persuade the people who legitimately used armed resistance, who have given us a chance, that there is some alternative. And say to them, look, it isn't a united Ireland, it's not all you fought for, died for, and went to prison for, but at least it allows us to get there without more people getting killed. (C)

There are six armed groups involved in this. Now the British have remilitarized. They have put millions of pounds into building army barracks. They have built watchtowers. The house, not the one I'm calling you from, but the one I live in, is overlooked by watchtowers. The house we met in is now overlooked by watchtowers. The borders are ringed by watchtowers. (C)

Even before the obscenity of Omagh, there were three children killed. You had 300 Catholic families evicted. The Orange boys wanted to march on the Garvaghy Road. We need to get further up the road. This is the most heavily policed state in Western Europe. All of that is in the equation. I hope when you come you'll meet victims of violence of British terrorism, as well as those of IRA and loyalist terrorism. (C)

The sense of all this is that conflict is ended in one of two ways: by one side beating the other, or by negotiation. I want to see us ending this with negotiation. We haven't done so badly so far; incidentally, it is very much, due to the input you've had in terms of initiatives and U.S. consistent involvement and encouragement. Five to six years ago, people could never have conceived where we would be now; I'm trying to take a 10-year view. (C)

In five years' time, I want to have all the armed groups and weapons out, have people living in a normal society, and the children of my generation will have children and grandchildren [gap]. (C)

The President: Why wouldn't that be aided by the quickest possible meeting between you and Trimble, and the quickest possible entry of Sinn Fein into the executive? (C)

Mr. Adams: Of course it would be. Trimble agreed, Tony Blair agreed, everyone agreed that the Sinn Fein would be in the executive. (C)

The President: I thought it was also agreed about decommissioning. The synchronization wasn't worked out. I can't understand why something that would not undermine the actual power of the IRA would undercut the agreement; it facilitates it. (C)

Mr. Adams: The agreement was that all the parties would work with the international body, and use their influence to bring about decommissioning. I negotiated it; that's what we did. First of all, the IRA won't do it at this time, leaving aside the agreement clearly states there is no precondition, or hurdle or block or commitment, for anyone to do any decommissioning at this point in the process. (C)

I'm trying to make the politics work to prove to armed groups that there is an alternative. That's what David signed up for, that's what everyone else and I signed up for. Get the referendum, and get into the Assembly and executive, and move the process forward, it's very, very clear about that. (C)

Sinn Fein is totally both in spirit and letter of the agreement, when we insist upon our people having their entitlement, with all other people as well. Tony Blair will tell you that, Bertie Ahern will, too. Both understand that totally. They wouldn't make an issue, because I think they recognize that the biggest thing is that the IRA has put its guns away, and that this issue must be dealt with. (C)

I think Bertie Ahern understands historically, from the Irish perspective especially, that even to expect the IRA to decommission for Trimble to talk to me, because all of that is with some other party, with de Chastelain, the IRA would see it as a surrender and vindication of the Unionists' position, and as totally contrary to what we have been involved in and seeking to persuade them to support. (C)

The President: So where are we? (C)

Mr. Adams: Where I see we're at is at the need to implement the agreement across the range of clauses. To move into the Assembly, and for David Trimble to recognize, and for me to recognize -- we've worked this out with Bertie Ahern and Tony Blair -- to satisfy David Trimble, I'm prepared to get Martin McGuinness to move forward and deal with de Chastelain, to appoint Martin to that position, for Martin to meet with and work with the decommissioning body trying to resolve all of these. (C)

I'm quite prepared to meet with David Trimble, despite my reservations about his intentions. My understanding is that you meet with and talk with people. The only thing I cannot do is get the IRA at this time to do anything with their weapons or explosives, except keep them out of use. I'll tell you my feeling, and it should be kept confidential, the British government knows it, I've made all sorts of private little initiatives to people whom I trust, to talk to David Trimble. It's my clear understanding that he himself appreciates that the decommissioning demand is an albatross that broke the whole thing down two to three years ago. I'm prepared to push and shove people to get together. (C)

I will talk to Mr. Blair and the Taoiseach in the morning. I think we will get some agreement on words, which is unnecessary, but what I think is important is to reach out, and it is important for the governments, and friends of the process like yourself, to focus on the need for the agreement to be implemented across the entire range of issues. (C)

The President: Well, I just don't know. If we don't get to the meeting point, we won't get very far. I'm afraid if you take one issue off the table the others will start collapsing. (C)

Mr. Adams: It was me who told the Taoiseach and the Prime Minister to get an A-B-C, a little process, a step-by-step to get all of us from here to the next place, but I can only do what I can do. I cannot get an organization that has done what it was obliged to do, to try to bring peace to this country, to create the space for the rest of us to build. (C)

Repeatedly there have been efforts to move it, and it has been insistent, as have all the other armed groups, that it has maintained the association, that it is up to us to implement the Good Friday agreement. Trimble is in breach of it; Tony will be in breach of it if he doesn't move it to where it should be moved. Tactically this is the only way to get armed groups to

disappear into the background, once you put in place an alternative, an organic process for justice and equality. The Unionists are still playing tag on the issue, which undermines my position, and they know that. So I think it's a matter of doing what we signed up to do, in the spirit and the letter.

(C)

The President: Hmmm. (U)

Mr. Adams: I mean it's going to be ridiculous if you're here, and I can put up as many reasons not to talk to David Trimble as he's put up excuses why he won't talk to me. The issue is that he's the First Minister. Stormont is the very place that is the symbol of apartheid. Even the fact that we're here and recognizing that David Trimble as the First Minister, given David's baggage, is huge for Republicans. People here certainly have a sense of that. And for us to be in one room, while you're speaking or receiving you, for David not to talk to me is madness again, it's crazy. It's back to what you were saying in Washington. Since the last time when you were here, no concession to your opponents, and all of that. (C)

The President: I just want to figure out how coming there is going to help something. I'm trying to push something forward, and I'm kind of worried about it. (C)

Mr. Adams: Well, it's my conviction we're going to get there, to a peace settlement, and obviously everyone coming from different positions has uncertainties about it. One thing that marks us as different from the Unionists is that we want change, maximum change. They're afraid of change. They're fairly conservative and see change as a disadvantage. (C)

I think Trimble intellectually understands there needs to be change, but he is going for the minimalist approach. He's a Unionist and wants to do the best by his own supporters. The Unionists are concerned about the sort of change needed. I think that, in the context of your visit, it would be of crucial importance that your coming here as the U.S. President acts as a catalyst for the process. (C)

The difference is that this British Prime Minister is much more progressive on this issue than his predecessor. He wants to move it forward, while the other man, even for managerial reasons, couldn't do so. And I think, if it isn't impertinent for me to say it, I think your public comments have to embrace, as far as you can, progress across the issues: justice, rights,

need for young people to be cherished on the basis of equality.
(C)

The reality is that you're coming to a partitioned island of only five million people, with the British government claiming jurisdiction over this part. The whole cultural, social, and economic dimension, and the militaristic dimension. Beatings, army camps, road checks, British Army patrols in neighborhoods, a whole range of prisoners, and the whole range of problems that need to be dealt with, before you deal with the constitutional issue. And of course, decommissioning is one of them. (C)

The key is, and I made the point but I didn't recognize the significance during the Garvaghy Road business, that in Little Rock, Arkansas, the governor of the state refused to implement the integration order. The President at that time, Eisenhower I think, or perhaps Kennedy, had to send in federal troops, which is exactly what is happening, and what is required, here. And in Garvaghy Road they had to send troops on almost the same basis, and all of that has to be fine-tuned into what's required so that we can move forward, and we have substantially, not withstanding the setbacks. (C)

A willingness to get around the table, and look around, dealing with every issue, not as preconditions, but as issues to be resolved; that's what you can bring. You can bring an American sense of fair play, equity, and justice. I think that's what the vast majority of people on this island want. The party apparatchiks may want something different. The ordinary people want this dealt with; they want justice, they want peace; they want this sorted out, worked out. People everywhere here want that, including many of the Unionists I talked to in Omagh, in the midst of that grief. They don't want these things to happen again. And they also recognize that when their own Unionist government was in power, it did all sorts of wrong things, too. There's no easy way; we have to persist and persevere, and be generous and good hearted, and try to see it from the other guy's point of view, and try to make progress. (C)

The President: All right, I'll see what I can do. I'll check with Tony and Bertie. (C)

Mr. Adams: And if you or Sandy or Jim could get back in touch with me before your visit, if there's any activity, I might have some ideas. (C)

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The President: Okay, we'll get back on it, and we'll be in touch. (C)

Mr. Adams: Okay, Mr. President. (U)

The President: Goodbye. (U)

Mr. Adams: Goodbye. (U)

-- End of Conversation --

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