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Filed on:

From the Private Secretary

12 June 1996

Ilen Martin,

ALL-PARTY TALKS: CONVERSATION WITH TRIMBLE

For the record, I should report the main points of the conversation between the Prime Minister and David Trimble at around 1420 on 11 June.

The Prime Minister asked what on earth was happening in the talks. Trimble said that he had put forward a compromise for the procedures, in the form of the 1991 procedural guidelines, slightly modified by Ken Maginnis. He was ready to accept Mitchell as Chairman on that basis. He could not accept Sir Patrick Mayhew's proposal. Once the rules of 6 June had been accepted, even if only temporarily, the pass would have been sold. In any case it was politically not possible for him to accept this proposal with Paisley and McCartney jumping up and down as they were. Meanwhile it was not helpful for Sir Patrick Mayhew to threaten to bring the whole house down on this issue.

The Prime Minister said that we saw no alternative to pressing ahead with Senator Mitchell as we had proposed. If Paisley and McCartney walked out, we could live with that. If the Ulster Unionists went as well, this would simply let Sinn Fein off the hook. We were happy to set up a committee to look at the rules once the first couple of items on the agenda had been tackled. This seemed perfectly reasonable to us.

Trimble said that he was aware of the risks of his decision but simply could not accept the rules of 6 June. The Chairman had too many powers. Mitchell had said he had not invented these rules himself and was happy to operate by consensus. The UUP had moved a long way, and were now making a reasonable compromise proposal. He thought HMG could probably accept it, but Spring was trying to undermine it.

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The Prime Minister said that trying to change the rules in the Business Committee was perfectly reasonable. Trying to change them now risked the collapse of the talks, with the Unionists getting the blame. Mitchell would not stay much longer. Procedural battles had to be fought in the right procedural way. He hoped a way through could be found, and would be happy to speak to Trimble again if this would help.

Comment. The Prime Minister took the view that a row with Trimble at that stage would not help. Trimble was in turn "reasonable". The Prime Minister has subsequently sent the attached letter, in order to help keep Trimble inside.

I am copying this letter to Jan Polley (Cabinet Office).

Yours ever
John
JOHN HOLMES

Martin Howard Esq
Northern Ireland Office

David Trimble Esq MP

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