26 November 1996

Prime Minister

I only saw the Paper given to the Irish government and Mr Hume briefly yesterday. I read it through quickly once and I have not had the chance to read it again or study it. Nevertheless it was immediately apparent to me that Paper differed significantly from the impression created by the briefing you gave me and two colleagues on Thursday. The differences concerned first, two points where there was a direct conflict between the briefing and the Paper and secondly, matters omitted from the briefing.

Direct conflicts

These are not necessarily the only two differences; but they were those that were immediately apparent to me even though I did not have with me my notes of that briefing. I was not in a position to make notes of the Paper and so my references to it today are from memory.

At the briefing you said that there would be an express statement that the requirements of the legislation would have to be met. You then set out those requirements as an unequivocal restoration of the cease-fire, and establishing a commitment to exclusively peaceful means, and showing a willingness to abide by the democratic process.

However, there is no express restatement of these requirements in the paper. When I mentioned this to Ancram he referred to a passing reference to paragraphs 8 and 9 of the White Paper and claimed that this read into the paper all three requirements. This attempted rescue is clearly unsustainable as further up the same page there is an express statement that the only precondition to entry to talks is an unequivocal restoration of the cease-fire. The result is that HMG's position is now virtually the same as that of the Irish, namely that a cease-fire and subscription to the Mitchell principles suffices.

The second difference concerns the first stage of the process to follow a cease-fire, namely meetings with the NIO at official/ministerial level. In the briefing we were told these contacts would be to test the intentions of Sinn Fein/IRA. In the Paper however, the purpose of the contacts is twofold, (i) testing the assurances of Sinn Fein/IRA and (ii) establishing confidence building measures. Last night you said that the confidence building measures would have to be established by Sinn Fein/IRA. This may very well be your

intention. The difficulty is that the paper does not say so. Rather it hints at the opposite. The twofold purpose suggests a two way street - a point made explicit in the penultimate paragraph of the Paper. This is then reinforced by the fact that Sinn Fein/IRA are, in all their current statements, demanding so-called confidence building measures with regard to prisons and the police. The public will interpret the Paper as offering a trade-off. Had the phrase been mentioned on Thursday we would have so interpreted it. I would find it very difficult to regard the withholding of that phrase as anything other than deliberate, and I know that were I to advance publicly the explanation of the phrase you gave me last night, it would be met with derision.

Matters omitted

The greater part of the Paper deals with the conduct of the talks. Last Thursday I adverted to the point that while we had sought a statement which defined a credible ceasefire, Hume and the Irish Govt were seeking a different statement, one dealing with the content of the talks. Your summary of that part of the paper was very brief and largely consisted of the assertion that it was merely a restatement of existing policy. Much of the paper is indeed a restatement of previous positions, but the content does differ as noted below and the tone has also changed.

There is frequent reference to confidence building measures, an indicative timeframe is eagerly embraced, and the leading role of the government is asserted. These are also the central demands that Sinn Fein/IRA is currently making. Reading it, it seemed to me to be a return to the pre-emptory approach that marred the NIO letter of 6 June and led to the lengthy procedural exchanges at Stormont.

I could believe that Hume and the Irish would be encouraged by the Paper and I expect that they will try to extract further changes. I assume that Sinn Fein/IRA have also received the Paper and that their current warning of lethal consequences are designed to reinforce the Irish Government's diplomacy.

Conclusion

I find the whole process to intensely disappointing. these exchanges began with a request by us for a definition of a genuine ceasefire. This we believed would make to easier to deal with decommissioning. At first you agreed that after the Lisburn and other bombs, the hurdles would have to be raised. We have ended up with a weak statement of a ceasefire, to which has been added many matters designed to act as inducements to Sinn Fein/IRA.

After Hume made his approach, I was assured that I would be shown all the relevant papers. Indeed I was told that it was only on that basis that Government decided to proceed. At one early state your language assumed that I had seen certain papers. It has now been denied to me that there was any decision to show me the papers other than just before publication. During the last few weeks the Irish Government and Mr Hume have been in close contact and anything shared with them will have gone to Sinn Fein. Journalists have told me that they believe the Paper given to Hume was with Adams that evening. On the other hand we were rarely offered meetings. Most, if not all of the meetings that actually occurred resulted from my requests. At those meetings we were generally given only vague language and no papers. John Holmes and Robert Cranborne can tell of my complaints about the inadequacy of the information volunteered. The result was that on Monday morning the enemies of the Union had all the information available to them while Ancram was refusing my requests for information - a clearly intolerable situation.

As I said to you last night, I do not think there has been any genuine consultation. I will study the paper when I can. My first impression is that it is thoroughly unsatisfactory. As I said to you last night, you have ended up accepting the Sinn Fein/IRA agenda. Last Thursday, we said that you had the choice between 85% of something or 100% of nothing, ie pressing on with talks with the present parties or giving a higher priority to Sinn Fein/IRA. It appears to me that you have preferred the latter.

David Trimble