

DESK IMMEDIATE**CONFIDENTIAL**

PS/SOFS (LTB)
 PS/SIR J WHEELER (LTB)
 PS/MICHAEL ANCRAM (LTB)
 PS/PUS (LTB)
 PS/SIR DAVID FELL
 MR LEGGE
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RECEIVED

10 JUL 1996

 ASSISTANT SEC
 CPL 697

From the Private Secretary

MR WATKINS

MR WOOD

MR RAY

MR STEPHENS

MR HILL

MR PERRY

MR MACCABE

Dear Martin,

CALL BY UNIONIST LEADERS, 9 JULY

David Trimble, Ian Paisley, Robert McCartney and Martin Smyth called on the Prime Minister in the House of Commons this afternoon for about an hour. The meeting was at their request, in the light of the recent developments in Portadown. There had been doubt up to the last minute whether Trimble would agree to McCartney's presence in the delegation, and whether the Prime Minister would therefore be faced with two meetings, but in the event all four turned up together. Sir Patrick Mayhew and Sir John Wheeler were there on our side.

The Prime Minister began by asking about the present situation. Was it spiralling out of control? Trimble said that the position was not too bad for the time being, particularly at Drumcree itself, but it could spiral out of control by the end of the week. He was particularly worried about what would happen on the night of 11/12 July. Aggressive police tactics had contributed to some of the recent trouble, although he also accepted that there was paramilitary involvement.

The Prime Minister commented that the police were themselves under pressure. A lot was at stake. He feared that, if the law and order battle was not won, we faced a much wider problem. Trimble agreed that big issues were at stake. It was not just the stand-off in Portadown. That could perhaps be resolved, but it had found a resonance throughout Northern Ireland. The Unionist community was fed up with continual concessions to Sinn Féin/IRA and took the view that enough was enough. He had tried to get across to the Government at various levels that the situation would be much worse this year than in previous years but without success. He feared that the Loyalist ceasefire could easily break down.

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The Prime Minister said that the RUC Chief Constable had taken his decision. This decision had his support and had to be upheld, even if others thought it was the wrong decision. It was important now to look forward and find a way out of the present situation. Trimble agreed but confirmed that, in his view, the Chief Constable had indeed made a mistake because he was obsessed with the image of the RUC. The march could have been taken down Garvaghy Road, even though this would have been difficult. Paisley added that the RUC had simply not taken into account the prospect of widespread trouble if they tried to reroute the march. The rerouting could well prove to be the straw which broke the Protestant camel's back. He then launched into various anecdotes about trouble in Ballymena the previous night which he believed had been caused by paramilitary thugs with faked orange sashes. This was the direct result of RUC overstretch.

The Prime Minister said that there appeared to be a possibility of a widespread breakdown of law and order. The aim had to be to resolve the stand-off at Drumcree, restore law and order, and re-establish confidence in the established political mechanisms. If this was to be achieved, everyone would have to put their shoulders to the wheel. A dialogue at local level had to be got going. The crocodile of violence and disorder must not be fed, or it would devour everybody.

Trimble agreed that the problem in Portadown had to be resolved first. It could not be resolved on the basis of the Orangemen going back the way they came. Even if they wanted to, they would not be allowed back in their own houses if they did. A way had to be found to take the march down the Garvaghy road, and then to find a solution which stopped this problem occurring every year.

The Prime Minister asked about the compromise solution in 1995. A confused discussion followed. Both Trimble and Paisley argued that there had not been direct negotiations between the two sides last year, and no specific agreement had been reached. There had been elements of a compromise around, and the RUC had been in touch with both sides. But the key element had been that the RUC had told the residents that they were going to take the march through anyway. This had pushed the residents into accepting the situation. This year, the Garvaghy Road Residents Association had shown no desire whatsoever to discuss a compromise. It was not possible to talk to their leader, Brendan McKenna, because he was a convicted terrorist, who continued to be an IRA man. Other possible interlocutors, including the Jesuits, had proved equally difficult to talk to.

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Discussion then returned to why the Chief Constable had taken the decision he had. Paisley claimed that the local RUC officers in Portadown had all said the march should have gone down the road. McCartney said that, viewed objectively, it was difficult to understand the Chief Constable's decision. If the march had gone down the Garvaghy road, there would have been difficulties, but nothing compared with what had happened so far and what might happen next. It was difficult to believe that it was not a politically inspired decision. Smyth reinforced the last point. There was a general perception that the decision to reroute the march was at Irish behest. The Prime Minister said that the Chief Constable had taken his decision on the basis of the views of his Chief Officers, all of whom had supported it except one. It had not been simply a personal decision. In any case, it was necessary to look forward. He saw three possible options:

- (i) the marchers would disperse and go home. This was clearly not going to happen;
- (ii) the march would be forced through. The RUC had made their decision and this was not going to happen either;
- (iii) some way through would be found by local dialogue. This looked the only realistic way forward.

Trimble said that there was a fourth option, which was that the Drumcree marchers would be forcibly dispersed by the Army. There was increasing concern about this. It would be helpful to have an assurance that the Army would not be used in this way. Sir Patrick Mayhew said that he had heard of no such proposal. In any case, the Army in these situations were under the operational control of the RUC. This provoked further anecdotes about the Army presence in Drumcree, worry about police without numbers, and rumours that soldiers were masquerading as policemen.

The Prime Minister returned to the options. The way forward had to lie through commonsense and local discussion to find an accommodation, as had been the case the previous year. Those at the meeting should then be prepared to stand together against others trying to cause disruption. He would see advantage in those at the meeting agreeing a statement that they were working for a local accommodation, so that those standing out against this could be seen for what they were. Trimble said that he saw great difficulties with this. Those standing out would be bound to include the Garvaghy Road Residents Association. They claimed they wanted to talk, even if they were not in practice ready to do so.

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In a confused intervention, Smyth harked back to the suspicions of political direction of the RUC, and underlined the view of the Loyalist community in general that rerouting the march could not be accepted. They saw Sinn Fein as pulling the strings behind the scenes, and had had enough of this. There were people looking for a local way out, but it could not be found through Brendan McKenna.

Sir John Wheeler repeated that there had been no Irish influence whatsoever on NIO Ministers or officials, or consequent political pressure on the Chief Constable from the NIO. A solution to the problem could only come about through dialogue between the District Orange Lodge and the local nationalist residents. Some mediation was also needed. The question was whether anyone in the Nationalist local community could act as a credible interlocutor. Trimble repeated that various groups in the Garvaghy Road area had been tried. Moderate figures who might be able to help, such as the local parish priest and the local SDLP Councillor, had been keeping their heads down. The same was true of Seamus Mallen. Another SDLP figure, Breige Rogers, had proved entirely negative. The Prime Minister commented that, if an accommodation was not found through dialogue, the Protestant community would get the blame.

McCartney said that, if it was accepted that the present situation could not continue, while it was arguable that the Chief Constable had made a mistake, would it be better to over-rule the Chief Constable, or allow a major confrontation on 12 July between the 50-70,000 marchers who might descend on Portadown? Clearly a policy based on saving the face of the Chief Constable was not good enough. In response to Sir Patrick Mayhew's question, Smyth said that the possibility of switching the 12 July Belfast march to Portadown was being considered, but it was not straight forward.

The Prime Minister appealed again for local negotiations between the Orangemen and the local Nationalist community. Trimble repeated that this did not seem possible because of the IRA's influence there. The RUC themselves could perhaps act as mediators, but he was not aware they were much in touch with the Nationalist community at present. The RUC officer most likely to be able to broker an agreement was called Houston. Paisley agreed. McCartney asked what the basis of any compromise would be. Presumably it would have to involve the march going down the road in some form. Smyth agreed. This had been under discussion, but written guarantees had been asked for, which made it more difficult. If a compromise was reached, involving the District Lodge walking down the road, but nobody else, he thought this would run. It would be possible to guarantee that only members from the District would walk, without banners or music. It was impossible to know how many people exactly this would involve, but it would probably be about 1200 or so.

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The Prime Minister commented that it was important not to float a compromise proposal too soon or it would simply be rejected. But he hoped progress could be made on the lines discussed. He thought the meeting had been useful, and that the press should be told so. The hope could also be expressed that what had happened last year, ie talks at local level, could also happen this year. He asked again whether the Unionist leaders could agree to a joint statement spelling this out, and read from a draft. Trimble and Paisley said that they could not agree to a joint statement along these lines, although they would have no objection if the Prime Minister issued his own statement. They would not criticise it themselves. They would also confirm that the meeting had been useful.

The meeting concluded at this point. The No 10 Press Office subsequently drew on the attached line to take, agreed with Sir Patrick Mayhew.

Comment

Discussion at this meeting went round in circles, with the Unionist leaders constantly trying to argue that the Chief Constable should be over-ruled, and that local dialogue was not possible because of the influence of Sinn Fein/IRA and the presence of Brendan McKenna. Nevertheless they appeared to accept in the end that a further attempt at a local accommodation should be made, perhaps involving the RUC at local level. This will clearly need to be given a push from our side too.

There was a further discussion of the prospects at the beginning of the NI Committee which followed. This threw up one or two other ideas about how the issue might best be taken forward. I assume these will be recorded separately by the Cabinet Office Secretariat.

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

Yours one
John

JOHN HOLMES

Martin Howard Esq
Northern Ireland Office

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