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DRAFT LETTER

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PRIME MINISTER'S MEETING WITH MR TRIMBLE: 17 OCTOBER

The Prime Minister is to see Mr Trimble at 5.30 pm this afternoon.
By way of briefing, I attach:

- points to make on the political process, including decommissioning and conditions of entry for Sinn Fein;
- briefing on the security situation, including measures taken since Lisburn and the two particular suggestions Mr Trimble has taken up: the use of intercept evidence and extending "authorised investigators".

On the talks process, we wish if possible to continue the process of persuading Mr Trimble to shift his emphasis from decommissioning to conditions of entry for Sinn Fein. There are clear signs that he is ready to do this.

The problem on decommissioning is that the gap between the proposals we have put forward with the Irish Government and those published by the UUP is simply too great to be bridged by concessions here or there. The UUP now cannot afford to depart from its published proposals. Concessions from us will not help - it is the SDLP and the Irish Government who the UUP have to persuade. Unless we can find some way around the problem, decommissioning will block the talks moving forward even without Sinn Fein.

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Making clearer how we interpret conditions of entry for Sinn Fein - and in particular that it is inconceivable in the wake of the Lisburn bomb that Sinn Fein could walk straight into the talks after a ceasefire - should help. It will go some way to provide the UUP with the confidence that they can go forward into the three stranded negotiations without Sinn Fein but without insisting on adoption of the UUP's approach to decommissioning (to which the Irish Government and SDLP will never agree).

It is critical therefore that in talking to Mr Trimble about clearer conditions of entry, he understands that there must be a quid pro quo on decommissioning. He needs to be prepared to co-operate in moving the talks on to the three strands without getting adoption of the UUP's proposals on decommissioning: that could mean that decommissioning is parked, to be returned to if ever Sinn Fein joined the negotiations.

But the SDLP and the Irish Government will be extremely wary of signing up to clearer conditions of entry for Sinn Fein unless they can also be assured that this will mean the negotiations move on to the three strands without decommissioning being a further block. Their view of Mr Trimble (with some justification) is that he often hints at such deals but rarely delivers (itself perhaps a symptom of his weak position within his own party and constant criticism from Bob McCartney and the DUP).

As to the detail of how we might make clearer conditions of entry for Sinn Fein, we should avoid being specific until we know whether we are likely to secure support from others. As NI agreed this morning, we should not float proposals with Mr Trimble until we have the Irish and US Governments on board. Otherwise we risk raising Mr Trimble's expectations falsely (and he has already claimed to other parties to be close to a "deal" on conditions of entry, correspondingly raising their suspicions). We need in particular to bring home to him that if the process is to move forward without Sinn Fein, we need the SDLP's support for that - including John

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Hume's. The SDLP, who feel under great electoral pressure from Sinn Fein, will not easily be persuaded unless they are convinced both that there is no prospect of a ceasefire and that there is a real prospect of progress in the talks without Sinn Fein.

We should also be seeking to steer Mr Trimble towards some defined delay between any ceasefire and Sinn Fein's entry to the negotiations, and away from other tests such as "permanence", an end to punishment beatings etc. The Irish Government have recognised the case for a delay or an "airlock", but are unlikely to support other tests which they will regard as new preconditions.

On time, Mr Trimble has mentioned six months in public. That looks too long - it is unlikely to get SDLP support, and risks sending the message that there can be no progress before the general election.

Mr Trimble knows about the Hume/Adams initiative in general, having been briefed by the Secretary of State but not shown any text. Given the approach endorsed by NI this morning, now is not the right time to be any more forthcoming.

A copy goes to Jan Polley and Colin Budd.

We need to move forward by consensus - how have your discussions with the SDLP got on? Have you found a way forward together yet?

From our discussions, we think we pushed the SDLP and the Irish Government just about as far as they will go on decommissioning. They have produced their Bill and have promised to publish it. But there remains a wide gap between their position and the UUP's. Can you see any way of bridging this?

But although Irish and SDLP unlikely to shift on decommissioning, in the wake of Lisburn they do see the case for clearer conditions for entry for Sinn Fein. Believe there is a growing consensus that Sinn Fein cannot declare a ceasefire and walk immediately into the talks. Ultimately, the Irish Government talked of a delay of a few weeks. Americans have a delay.

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