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SUBJECT
MASTER

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From the Private Secretary

18 July 1996

Dee Martin,

CALL BY SDLP MPs: 17 JULY

John Hume, Seamus Mallon and Joe Hendron called on the Prime Minister on 17 July, at their request. Sir Patrick Mayhew, Michael Ancram and Sir John Chilcott were there on our side.

Hume opened by saying that the situation in Northern Ireland had moved from one of great hope to despair in a very short space of time. He had never known such a depth of anger as there was in the Nationalist community following last week's events. Irish history was repeating itself, with the Orange card being played again, and the British Government backing down as they had done before. As before, the lesson was that the only thing the British understood was force. In 1912, the British Parliament had voted for home rule for the whole of Ireland, but the Unionists had played the Orange card, and the British Government had backed down. This had led directly to the 1916 Easter Rising. In 1974, the first mixed government Northern Ireland had ever had had been established, but it had collapsed in the face of Protestant force. This had led to 20 years of IRA violence. The only Prime Minister who had not backed down was Mrs Thatcher, who had faced down the Protestant anger over the Anglo-Irish Agreement.

Hume continued that a commonsense decision had been taken to reroute the Drumcree march. However, the organisers of the march, supported by the Unionist leaders, had blocked roads, airports and harbours, intimidated people out of their homes, and generally caused mayhem to reverse this decision. The Government had backed down in the face of this intimidation. The effect on the Nationalist community could be imagined.

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The Prime Minister said that the constitutional position in the UK was quite clear. The Government did not intervene in policing decisions, and the Chief Constable had taken the decision he thought right in the circumstances. The Government's involvement had been confined to sending him more troops to support him when he asked for them. But the issue now was to make some good come out of what had happened. A large part of the Catholic community had been shaken by what had happened. But so had a large part of the Protestant community. This had to be turned to advantage in the Belfast talks. In particular, the talks should move on from procedure to substance, decisively and swiftly. Mitchell agreed with this. Words now could not change what had happened or change people's minds about it. The need was to move forward and make progress.

Hume said that their request was indeed for the Government to do everything in its power to make the talks process serious. The SDLP had not wanted the elections. These had brought in extra parties to the talks, who were simply playing games. It was time to cut out the nonsense and concentrate on making the talks real and substantial. The Prime Minister agreed. As he had told Panorama, he was frustrated by the lack of progress. He could not force people to agree, but he could put on some pressure, and he would do so. There was just a chance that the shockwave of last week's events could be reversed and turned into an opportunity to make progress. But it might not be possible to carry all the parties with us. There might be a laggard or two left behind.

Hume said that the talks were central. The events of Drumcree were a symptom of the failure of politicians. The British and Irish Governments now needed to push hard for progress. If one or two parties were left behind in this process, that would just be too bad. A settlement could in any case not be imposed on the people of Northern Ireland, even if not every party agreed. The Prime Minister agreed. The only alternative was for the talks to run into the sand. Sir Patrick Mayhew confirmed that an attempt would be made to push through the procedural rules, with Mitchell's help. The talks had spent 37 days fiddling about. It was now time to move on.

The Prime Minister commented that it was not only time at the talks themselves that had been wasted; an interminable time had been spent by him and others getting all the horses to the starting gate. Hume commented that, unfortunately, it was the same horses that hesitated every time. The Unionists were spending all their time and effort on their internal struggles, rather than getting on with things. Sir Patrick Mayhew said that the main Unionist horse had had a fright, and could now change his approach. It was time for Trimble to show whether he was serious about this process or not.

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Mallon, who had looked impatient through all of this, commented that the discussion was going on as if nothing serious had happened. He had one simple question. How could the Nationalist community now have any confidence or trust in what the Government said? The Government had never given the Nationalists a proper basis for trust. The Prime Minister said that if he had not been genuinely interested in making progress, he could have taken the position of his predecessors, effectively confining himself to criticising the IRA. He did not need to have spent so much time and effort in trying to get talks going. But he had done so, and this should be acknowledged. The Unionists told him they did not trust him either. That suggested he might not be on entirely the wrong track.

Mallon said that he did not accept this comparison. It was not the Nationalists who had blocked the roads and intimidated the people over the past week, but the Unionists. More damage had been done to the trust of the Nationalist community in the last 10 days than in the last 25 years. It was not a pan-Nationalist front which had been created, but a pan-Catholic front. He now found a depth of religious bigotry that he had never dreamed of seeing, not just in the Unionist community, but in his own. This was a frightening phenomenon which would take its toll politically. Over the previous 10 days, a challenge had been mounted to authority, and that challenge had won. It was important that the Prime Minister understand the damage created by this and not try to put off the responsibility, which belonged to the Government, as the ultimate authority, on to others. He did not say this lightly. But the belief that the damage done could be repaired in the talks might simply be wrong. It was certainly the case that if the talks could not deliver progress quickly, the political process would be dead.

The Prime Minister said that he did not agree with Mallon's analysis, but acknowledged the damage that had been done. Nevertheless, the need was to look forward and to produce progress in the talks. There was no other game in town. All concerned could disagree with each other about the recent events, but that would not be productive. If the SDLP had other practical ideas on how progress could be made, he was happy to listen to them. Otherwise, the need was to use the talks to move forward.

Mallon commented that the basic premise of the talks, albeit an unwritten one, was that the idea of constitutional change would be set aside for the next generation. In return, a situation of absolute equality between the two communities would be created, where everyone's rights would be respected, and, to use the well-worn cliché, parity of esteem would be established. This premise had been challenged by the leader of the biggest Unionist party at Drumcree, and the system had failed the test. What guarantee could there now be that, if an agreed settlement was reached on the basis he had described, this

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could be put into effect in Northern Ireland? This was a crucial question. He would give the talks all he had, but he did not want to be operating on a false basis. He also wanted to know whether the principles and arrangements to which the British Government had signed up in the Anglo-Irish Agreement, the Downing Street Declaration, and the Joint Framework Document were still valid in British eyes. Would the British Government be ready to table these ideas in negotiations?

Hendron said that his constituency was possibly the most difficult in the UK. He had consistently stood for moderation within the SDLP. But the situation was now the worst since 1969. He acknowledged that the Prime Minister and Sir Patrick Mayhew had worked hard to bring about talks. But the events of the past week had been traumatic. They had been a Pyrrhic victory for Trimble, but a real and massive victory for the IRA and Sinn Fein. He deeply resented this. The Government had handed the IRA this victory on a plate, without their having to fire a shot. The great losers were the people of Northern Ireland. There was now a massive move amongst the Catholic community, not to the Provisionals, but away from moderation. He agreed that the talks were now the way forward. But some things had to be said, not least so that it could be made clear publicly that they had been said.

He therefore wanted to raise the following points:

- The savage murder of Michael McGoldrick had been a terrible blow to confidence in the Catholic community.
- The responsibility for the events in Drumcree should not be laid simply at the door of thugs and paramilitaries but also at the door of the political leaders involved.
- He had for 20 years tried to be as objective as possible about the RUC, and give them credit where it was due. The reality now was that the RUC was completely unacceptable on every Nationalist estate.
- When the RUC had come to move from the Garvaghy Road those blocking it, there had been an obvious glee in performing this task which had made a dreadful impression.
- The RUC seemed happy to use plastic bullets in opposing Nationalist protestors, and reluctant to do so when the Protestants were involved. Protestant roadblocks had been left uncleared. He had thought he had seen the end of this kind of discrimination.
- The Ormeau road "curfew" had been quite unacceptable.

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- The Prime Minister had said on Panorama that the Garvaghy Road residents had refused to compromise or even to talk. This was not so. He had seen, for example, two letters that Brendon McKenna had written to David Trimble asking for discussions, before the ceasefire had broken down.
- While he recognised that some blame had to be attached to both sides, it was not reasonable to say that this was equal. The Prime Minister should be ready to spell out the responsibility of the Orangemen and Unionists more clearly.

The Prime Minister said that he would pick up the points which had been made:

- He agreed that the Provisionals were the big winners out of what happened. This was highly regrettable.
- There had been intransigence on both sides. There had been a lack of readiness to compromise on the part of the Garvaghy Road residents. But he accepted that the role of the Orange mob was fundamental.
- He agreed that the murder of Mr McGoldrick had been a dreadful event.
- He stood by the principles set out in the Joint Framework Document. He did not like every word of it. But neither had Albert Reynolds. It had been a compromise between the British and Irish Governments.
- How could we be sure that an agreement once reached would be adhered to? This was a good question. But he had promised a referendum, and a referendum there would be. Once the agreement had been approved by the people, no British Government, and no British political party, could ignore it. But it was never possible to remove every shadow of doubt about this.

The Prime Minister continued that these kind of face to face arguments could go on. But the real need was to look forward and make rapid, positive progress in the talks. He could be wrong that the shock wave of events last week would be an impetus to progress. The talks could break down instead. But he saw no other way of moving forward. It was clear that progress could not be made without the SDLP and without the UUP, although not all the other parties were absolutely necessary.

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Sir Patrick Mayhew said that he fully accepted the depth of anger felt on the Nationalist side, and agreed that there was a movement towards pan-Catholic solidarity and towards the extremes. Mallon had asked for a guarantee about the results of the talks. In the nature of things there could not be an absolute guarantee, but the Government was committed to doing all it could to reach an agreement and implement it. He believed the situation was retrievable, but this did not mean it would necessarily be retrieved. We had the political will to retrieve it. Others might not have. The position of David Trimble was unclear. Much of his behaviour was driven by fear of one sort or another. He had asked the Deputy Chief Constable about the point raised by Joe Hendron on different RUC handling of different demonstrations. His response had been that, when the RUC had faced a challenge from the Orangemen, the Orangemen had deliberately set out to over-stretch the RUC. In many cases therefore they had simply not had sufficient resources on the spot. He believed this was a genuine explanation but knew how deeply the apparent discrimination was felt.

Michael Ancram said that we had talked to all the parties in the last 24 hours. His impression was that the previous delaying tactics would be dropped, and that agreement could be reached on the procedural rules and the plenary agenda in a few days, if all parties applied themselves.

Mallon said that the shock waves of last week's event went in all directions and could not simply be channelled as had been suggested. Meanwhile he did not agree with Joe Hendron's comment that the movement in the Catholic community was not to the Provisionals. It most certainly was, and this should not be under-estimated. Going back to the Joint Framework Document, he took the Prime Minister's point about the principles of the Document. But the central principle of the Document had been overthrown by the events of the previous week. Moreover, there was more in the document than just principles. It set out the detailed, preferred positions of the British and Irish Governments. Were they still the positions of the British Government?

The Prime Minister repeated that the Joint Framework Document was a compromise between the British and Irish Governments. It represented the two Governments' view of what had the best chance of being accepted. He stood by the compromises it contained. However it could not be imposed, and the outcome had to be the result of negotiations.

Mallon returned to the question of a guarantee. He was not querying whether a referendum would be held, but whether a settlement would be enforceable even if it had been accepted in a referendum. The events of the past week cast doubt on this. He also wanted to draw attention to the position in the talks. There were eleven parties around the table in Castle Buildings, but

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only one represented the Nationalist position. The SDLP alone was therefore representing more than 40 per cent of the population. But they were being asked to make concession after concession. That could not continue indefinitely without the elastic breaking. It was grossly unfair that there was only one party representing the Catholic community, and that all the weight of the pressure was put on that party just to keep David Trimble in the talks. The strain might prove too much.

Michael Ancram said that the fundamental difficulty was that, until the rules of procedure had been agreed, there was no method for reaching agreement. Mallon agreed there had to be a move to decisions by sufficient consensus very soon.

The Prime Minister said that he understood the points that had been made. But the SDLP was not the only body under constant criticism for making concessions. The British Government was constantly criticised in the press, by the Unionists and by some British politicians for making concessions to the Nationalists. The Anglo/Irish Agreement was a particular case in point.

Hume summed up that the Government were saying very clearly that the talks were serious, and that all their energies would be devoted to making progress at them. That fitted with the SDLP's basic message which was that the talks had to be made into genuine negotiations. The Prime Minister confirmed that was indeed our policy and our objective. The talks had to move from procedure to substance. He was fed up with jumping through procedural hoops and wanted to move on.

The Prime Minister concluded that he was glad to have had the meeting. The SDLP side said that they were grateful to the Prime Minister for seeing them.

There was a brief discussion of press handling. Hume said that the SDLP would make clear that they had asked for the meeting in order to express their views on recent events and they had done so. They would also stress their main point, that the need now was to make real progress in the talks.

Comment

This was a better meeting, both in tone and in substance, than might have been anticipated. Hume was clearly keen not to have a row, and to keep the talks going. Mallon was calm but did not conceal his own anger and despair about what had happened. Nevertheless he was able to make his points and conceded afterwards to the press that they had met a reasonably sensitive response. Hume rang me subsequently to say that he thought it had been a good meeting. He was delighted that the central point about making the talks

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serious had been agreed. He confirmed my impression that he had put a lot of pressure on Mallon to avoid an open row.

I am copying this to William Ehrman (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), Jan Polley (Cabinet Office) and Veronica Sutherland in Dublin by fax.

18 July 1995

Yours ever
John

JOHN HOLMES

It would be useful to have a paper of this kind by the middle of next week, before summer holidays start in earnest. I realise this is a tight deadline, given all your other preoccupations, but it should at least help in keeping it "quick and dirty", which is what I am looking for at this stage.

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

JOHN HOLMES

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