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SECRETARY OF STATE
FOR
NORTHERN IRELAND

John Holmes Esq
Private Secretary to the
Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
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16 July 1996

Dear John,

MEETING WITH SDLP MPs: WEDNESDAY 17 JULY

The Prime Minister is to see John Hume, Seamus Mallon, Eddie McGrady and Joe Hendron at 3.45 pm tomorrow. The Secretary of State and Sir John Chilcot will also be present. *(and Michael Ancram)*

The meeting will inevitably reflect the depth of anger, sense of betrayal and loss of trust in HMG and the RUC which has united all strands of the nationalist community since the Orange march was allowed to pass down the Garvaghy Road. As a result nationalist confidence in the political talks process has been dented: they doubt unionists' good faith; fear that HMG cannot persuade unionists to reach an accommodation on reasonable terms; and see Sinn Féin as close to rehabilitation (or, rather, that unionists have descended to Sinn Féin's level).

There is little that can be said or done about feelings over past events. The priority at the meeting will be to begin to restore nationalist confidence in the talks process and to urge on them continued positive engagement as the only realistic way forward.

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Objectives

At the meeting the Prime Minister might therefore aim to:

- listen to SDLP views;
- show understanding of the depth of nationalist feeling;
- reassure the SDLP of the Government's impartiality and respect for the principle of parity of esteem;
- persuade the SDLP to engage constructively in the negotiations.

A speaking note is attached. Security briefing, including the details of Drumcree and of the review which the Secretary of State has announced, is also attached. The rest of this note offers detailed background, together with some suggestions on handling the meeting.

Reaction to Drumcree

The nationalist view of events at Drumcree, which has united virtually all strands of Catholic opinion, is:

- unionists have always regarded Catholics as second class citizens. Orange marches through unionist areas are designed to remind Catholics of this;

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- Orange marches should therefore not be allowed through Catholic areas without their consent, so the Chief Constable's first decision to re-route the parade was correct;
- the second decision, to allow the parade through, was simply a cave-in to mob rule, reminiscent of the collapse of the 1974 power sharing executive in the face of the loyalist workers strike;
- unionist politicians incited loyalists to defy the law but were not condemned by the Government. There is grave suspicion of Mr Trimble's role and his personal direct links with loyalist paramilitaries;
- double standards were applied. The RUC dealt with nationalist resistance more harshly than loyalist law breaking, and HMG, so vehement in its condemnation of republican terrorism, was silent on unionist violence and threats.

Although this may appear wholly disproportionate, there is no doubting the depth of nationalist feeling. All the SDLP MPs will have first-hand experience of it. Seamus Mallon found himself blockaded in his home last week by loyalists (he was airlifted out by Army helicopter).

Attitude to the Talks process

All this spills directly over into nationalist doubts about the political process. They now doubt whether unionists are interested in a balanced accommodation and fear that HMG cannot, or will not,



live up to its undertakings of rigorous impartiality and respect for parity of esteem in the Framework Document. Some in the SDLP fear that Sinn Féin's analysis - that HMG cannot be trusted and the negotiations are a sham - is proving correct. Their withdrawal from the Forum (which they always saw as a sop to unionists) underlines their doubts. On the other hand they know the collapse of the Talks process would leave a vacuum which would feed terrorism. Prior to Drumcree, despite SDLP frustration over the time taken on procedural issues, there were signs of a rapprochement between the UUP and the SDLP. Both had seemed to be prepared to accept a compromise in which:

Sinn Féin

- the Ground Rules formally remained in place; but
- a comprehensive set of rules of procedure were adopted by the participants and were the only document to which the Chairmen needed to refer in conducting the negotiations.

On Senator Mitchell's account of his bilateral today with the SDLP (please protect) the SDLP would still be prepared to go along with this compromise but:

- they require significant progress on these procedural issues quickly as a sign that unionists are serious and note merely stalling;

- they want to avoid a round table discussion until unionists are ready to adopt the rules of procedure and agree the rest of the agenda for the opening plenary.

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They think any round table discussion will inevitably end in recriminations, in which the SDLP would be forced to press their own indictment that unionists have dishonoured the Mitchell principles and should be thrown out of the negotiations.

This suggests that, if the UUP are prepared to do a deal on procedural issues - if necessary without DUP and UKUP support - then a compromise can be reached. This may require the Prime Minister to intervene with Mr Trimble. But the SDLP are clearly impatient and there are suggestions that, without progress over the next couple of weeks, they will abandon the process.

Sinn Féin

Events at Drumcree have also served to rehabilitate Sinn Féin to some extent in nationalist eyes (although this week's arrests in south London have served as a useful reminder of the other side of the coin).

The Irish Government are having a meeting between officials and Sinn Féin tomorrow (Wednesday). Hume may have some response to the Prime Minister's letter to him of 8 July, commenting on Adams' letter of 26 June which Hume handed over to the Prime Minister on 2 July. (Hume may be reluctant to mention this exchange in front of his colleagues, who may not know about it.)

There is no suggestion of wavering on the part of the Irish Government on the requirement for an unequivocal restoration of the IRA ceasefire before Sinn Féin can meet Irish Ministers or join negotiations. We must clearly stand firm on this requirement, not least because it is now set in statute.



The Prime Minister's letter to Hume did, however, carefully leave open the possibility of considering a meeting between officials and Sinn Féin, if Sinn Féin requested it, made a persuasive case for it and events on the ground justified it.

Handling the SDLP

Michael Ancram had a private meeting with John Hume and Seamus Mallon this afternoon. It was clear from that meeting that the SDLP will be coming tomorrow in black mood.

The Secretary of State and Michael Ancram's advice is that the Prime Minister should aim to soak up recriminations over Drumcree, show sympathy and understanding for nationalist perceptions, avoid recriminations himself and move the discussion on to how to take the political process forward.

Without accepting all the unfounded allegations that have been made in recent days, a recognition that the situation is extremely serious, that the rule of law has been set back and that nationalists feel anger and dismay (all points already acknowledged by the Chief Constable) would go some way to persuading the SDLP that the Government has some understanding of their position.

On the positive side, reaffirmations of the Government's desire to work in close partnership with the Irish Government, a commitment to the principle of parity of esteem and the sort of outcome set out in the Framework Document, together with our determination to see substantive progress made quickly in the negotiations, would all offer positive signs to the SDLP of the seriousness of the Talks process.

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~~BRIEFING ON SECURITY ISSUES FOR THE PM'S MEETING WITH JOHN HUME - 17~~
 The Prime Minister may also wish to re-emphasise his personal commitment and his readiness to be personally involved if that would be helpful - not least in making the case direct to Mr Trimble that now is the time to be seen to be making substantive progress.

These points are reflected in the attached speaking note.

A copy goes to Colin Budd and Jan Polley.

Tom
Martin
MARTIN HOWARD

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