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PRIME MINISTER'S MEETING WITH LOYALIST PARTIES, 20 NOVEMBER

SPEAKING NOTE: POLITICAL AND SECURITY MATTERS

1. The Loyalist Ceasefire

The continuing restraint of the Loyalist paramilitaries is of critical importance to efforts to secure a better future for Northern Ireland. Ministers have regularly commended the discipline of the Loyalist organisations: in my own speech at the Conservative Party Conference, I applauded the way that the ceasefire had been maintained in the face of IRA provocation, and drew attention to the influence and standing that loyalism had gained as a result.

I appreciate the pressures there must have been within paramilitary groups over the IRA Lisburn bomb. The maintenance of the ceasefire in such circumstances has I believe earned Loyalists much credit in Northern Ireland, Great Britain and further afield: indeed is seen as one of the most important signs of hope in the present Northern Ireland situation.

2. Consent

[The Loyalists have told us that they will be looking to the Prime Minister to reaffirm the Government's commitment to the principle of consent - in fact something Ministers do very regularly.

Mr McMichael takes the line that it is unacceptable for the future of Northern Ireland to be determined by a majority of 50% plus one: he would argue for a minimum of two-thirds to any proposals. The Joint Declaration and Frameworks document, however, speak only of the wish of "a greater number of the people of Northern Ireland" or of "a

CONFIDENTIAL

majority". This is difficult: but the problem is unlikely to arise in the near future.]

The principle of consent is a keystone of our approach to Northern Ireland, and has long been embodied in the statutory guarantee. It is further safeguarded by the "triple lock" to which any settlement will be subject: it must be approved by the parties, then by the people at referendums in Northern Ireland and in the Republic, and then by Parliament.

I have made clear myself - most recently at the Party Conference- that I do not believe Northern Ireland will leave the UK, and I certainly do not wish it to do so. I and other Ministers have often said publicly that we cherish Northern Ireland's membership of the United Kingdom.

What should be equally reassuring is the overwhelming acceptance that has developed throughout Ireland of the principle of consent, signed up to in the Joint Declaration, the Framework Document and the work of the Dublin Forum. It was summed up by Mr Bruton in an important speech in the Dail on 10 October: "the British presence in Ireland is not the British Army of State, but a million Unionistswe, the people in the Republic, have no agenda of progressive takeover of Northern Ireland against the wishes of the majority of people there consent does not now exist to a united Ireland, and is unlikely to do so in any near future".

Our position is crystal clear. So is that of the Irish. But I appreciate we have to go on working .

[If raised: the mechanisms and principles by which consent is assessed might be considered in the talks. What is clear, however, is that this is not a question that will arise in the foreseeable future: it appears most unlikely that there will be any sort of majority for Northern Ireland leaving the United Kingdom for a very long time, if ever].

CONFIDENTIAL

3. Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution

[The Loyalists have suggested that the Government will need to put pressure on the Irish Government during the negotiations to make changes in Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution, which embody the "claim" on Northern Ireland.]

We have always made clear that any sort of legal claim in the Irish Constitution over Northern Ireland is entirely invalid.

The Irish have agreed, in the Framework document, to introduce and support changes in the Irish Constitution reflecting the principle of consent. We shall not of course let them forget this in the talks, and nor will you and others; but I believe in any event that they have recognised the need for change. Mr Bruton said in the Dail last month (10 October) that he was looking at amendments to Articles 2 and 3 in line with the Frameworks, "emphasising that it is agreement between peoples, and not territorial aggrandisement, that we are seeking".

Articles 2 and 3 do not correspond with any reality. The need for change is widely recognised in Dublin as elsewhere. The Irish Government have however to proceed with some caution: they will need to carry an amendment to the Irish Constitution in a referendum.

4. Position in Negotiations

[The Loyalist parties may seek the Prime Minister's assessment of the prospect of early movement in negotiations and raise their concerns about DUP and UKUP hostility to them].

CONFIDENTIAL

We remain very grateful for your constructive approach to the negotiations. It is important that the Loyalist voice is heard. I appreciate the depth of your frustration and anxiety at the failure to move faster, and address issues of substance.

We do believe that there can be progress before the elections; and it would be dangerous to put the Talks into suspension until much nearer an election.

We continue to make all the efforts we can to get round the blockages. That, crucially, means decommissioning. The question has to be addressed, mechanisms established to permit further progress on decommissioning alongside negotiations, and an undertaking given by all participants to work constructively to implement them. I know that is not easy for you, but it is an essential part of the Mitchell compromise, and we cannot realistically expect agreement on anything not reflecting the essential elements of Mitchell.

The Mitchell approach however requires decommissioning on the basis of mutual commitment and participation of the paramilitary organisations. It is not asking for unilateral decommissioning. We recognise that that is unrealistic.

5. IRA intentions and possible entry of Sinn Fein

[The delegation are likely to seek an assessment of prospects for a resumed IRA ceasefire, and to ask about criteria for the admission of Sinn Fein].

We approach talk of a renewed ceasefire with some scepticism. But some of those we talk to believe there is a good prospect of a ceasefire being declared. We must take this seriously, therefore.

CONFIDENTIAL

We are not open to negotiation with Sinn Fein or the IRA about any part of our position on talks or a settlement. We have regular discussions with all the Northern Ireland party leaders about these issues, but say nothing in private that we are not prepared to say in public.

If a new IRA ceasefire was declared, the Government would have to look very carefully about what was being said and what was happening on the ground, and it would obviously take time to establish the criteria laid down in statute was genuinely met: an unequivocal restoration of the 1994 ceasefire. After recent IRA activity, there could be no question of the IRA declaring a ceasefire one day, and Sinn Fein taking a full part in talks the next.

We still believe that the negotiations would benefit from being as inclusive as possible. But we believe also that they are capable of making worthwhile progress in the absence of Sinn Fein.

What is your assessment of the likelihood of an IRA ceasefire? What criteria would you favour applying?

6. Security Policy

[Both groups have pressed Ministers for a 'stronger' security policy in the light of renewed IRA terrorism, pointing out that the loyalist paramilitaries originally developed because of a perception that the security forces were not tackling the IRA. They have particularly mentioned that only two people have been convicted of the offence of "directing terrorism" under the emergency legislation: the problem here is that witnesses are not generally available.]

There is no policy of slackening the security effort: indeed it has been stepped up since the Thiepval barracks bombing.

CONFIDENTIAL

Since the end of the IRA ceasefire:

- 214 charges of a terrorist nature have been brought against republicans;
- one man has been charged in connection with the barracks bomb;
- three further suspected senior republican terrorists were charged last week;
- Army patrolling has been stepped up since Thiepval, and additional vehicle checkpoints have been set up;
- recent finds in the South, and arrests in London, have disrupted PIRA efforts;
- [offence of directing terrorism]: the police will not pass up any opportunity to secure convictions on this charge, but it presents real difficulties of proof - testimony of the sort required is rarely forthcoming.