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From the Private Secretary

22 January 1997

Dear Sir,

**CALL BY THE NORTHERN IRELAND WOMEN'S COALITION:
22 JANUARY**

Monica McWilliams, Pearl Sagar, Bronagh Hinds and Mary Blood called on the Prime Minister this afternoon, at their longstanding request. The Prime Minister was accompanied by Sir Patrick Mayhew and Michael Ancram. The meeting lasted almost an hour, compared to the 30 minutes originally allotted, and took place in a very good atmosphere.

Ms. Hinds said that there had been much criticism in Northern Ireland of the May elections and the talks process, but the Coalition fully endorsed the Government's approach. They believed that the talks set up and the presence of independent chairmen were absolutely right. They also believed that it was helpful to have a much greater number of parties than in the 1991/92 talks. This allowed different combinations of parties to emerge, although not enough use had been made of the presence of the smaller parties to promote progress. It was natural to take notice of the UUP and the SDLP as the biggest parties, but other parties could also play a valuable role, and change the dynamic of the negotiations.

Ms. Hinds continued that some parties were not committed to the talks process - she made clear that she meant the DUP and the UKUP. For their part, the Coalition were fully committed to making progress and keeping the talks in being. They were also firm advocates of compromise. However, they were very concerned about the current impasse over decommissioning. The four small parties and the Alliance had met earlier in the week to see if they could unblock this, at least on the issue of the location of Confidence Building Measures in the process. Nevertheless a degree of demoralisation was setting in, not helped by press suggestions that the NIO now thought that the talks could not move forward. The Prime Minister's remarks that morning had seemed to go in the same direction. The Coalition believed that optimism had to be maintained, and that the Government had a responsibility to send this message. They hoped that the talks would not close prematurely before the General Election. This would be very dangerous, not least for the Loyalists.

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The people of Northern Ireland would not appreciate any suggestion that Northern Ireland was not high on the agenda of British politicians. It was also important to achieve something in the talks before they closed for the election.

The Coalition believed that it was for the British Government to determine the entry conditions for Sinn Fein, not for the other parties. The British Government had originally backed the Mitchell report. The UUP demand for a tranche of arms in advance of negotiations was not consistent with the Mitchell report. The Government's position on this had not come through clearly. It was vital to signal that there was no retreat to pre-Mitchell demands for prior decommissioning. Meanwhile the Coalition firmly believed in an inclusive talks process and wanted to see Sinn Fein in. They had met Sinn Fein and told them this, while underlining that there had to be a proper ceasefire first. The Coalition were also concerned that the Loyalists should not be manipulated out of the talks, and had been worried by the NIO statement of 21 January.

Finally, the Coalition believed that the talks process worked best when the two Governments were of one mind. Some parties spent their time trying to divide the two Governments. But it was important that they continued to work together.

The Prime Minister, picking up these points, said that he agreed that unfortunately not all the parties at the table were committed to the success of the talks. On decommissioning, it had always been clear that this would be the biggest hurdle. He had not given up on progress; and we were still plugging away to find a way through. Meanwhile, he was happy to confirm his support for the Mitchell report and for parallel decommissioning. He would not of course object if some prior decommissioning could be achieved, but that was not HMG's policy and was not realistic.

He agreed also about the need for optimism about the future of the talks. He had not said that they could not make progress, but had simply made a factual observation that they were going through a sticky patch. The real problem was that either of the major parties could stop progress, by walking out. This limited the options. He agreed on the desirability of Sinn Fein being in the talks. But it would not help if they came in and others walked out. Other parties had to be brought along if at all possible. Moreover, it would not be acceptable for Sinn Fein to feel free to leave the talks at the first blockage and go back to violence.

He also agreed on the need for compromise. This required real courage from the political leaders. "Standing firm" on existing positions was easy. He also agreed on the desirability of the two Governments working together. For the most part we did, and he welcomed this. He was ready to work with any

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Irish Government. There were bound to be occasional differences, given where we both started from. But these did not break the relationship.

Mrs. Blood said that the perception on the street in Belfast was that the talks were going down the drain, and the Loyalists would be expelled. Everyone would then head for their bunkers. That was why a clear Government statement about the talks continuing was needed. The despair on the streets was even worse than before 1994, because people had had a taste of freedom. She feared that all the great progress in cross community work in the last two years would be lost. The major funders who had emerged could disappear. There was a real appreciation on the ground of the need for all to work together.

The Prime Minister asked why in that case Northern Ireland voters still opted for parties taking up extreme positions. Mrs. Blood said that those who had voted for Sinn Fein in the Forum elections had done so because they thought that would get Sinn Fein into the talks. The same thinking had applied to the Loyalists. She emphasised again that the talks had to go on, without a long interruption. Otherwise there could be many deaths before they resumed.

The Prime Minister said that he was certainly determined to keep the talks going. But he could not force the parties to agree and to stay in the talks. He was pleased to hear about perceptions on the street, but did not know how he could tap these perceptions. Mrs. Blood said that she could not answer this question. But she had no doubt that views on the street were against the way the Unionists were dealing with decommissioning. She thought politicians standing in the general election would be wise to want to refer to progress in the talks, rather than the opposite. Ms. Hinds added that it was important for the Government to close off the bolt-holes to which some parties liked to retreat. One major bolt-hole was Unionist insistence on a tranche of prior decommissioning. A strong statement from the Government could help to close this off. The problem was that for many Unionists, any compromise was seen as a sell out to the Nationalists. She could not understand the UUP position, and hoped that the Government would encourage them to be more positive.

Ms. McWilliams said that the Coalition constantly tried to talk up the talks. They agreed that they were the only game in town. It was absurd that, one year on from the Mitchell report publication, the Unionists were still picking out the bits they liked. Peace was too important for this approach. It was time the truth about the talks came out. One of the advantages of the Loyalists was that they were capable of telling the truth about Unionist positions. But the Coalition had the impression, not least from accounts of the Prime Minister's meeting with Trimble the previous day, that the UUP and the Government were now agreed that the talks should close down. (The Prime Minister said this was certainly not the case.) Trimble had never taken

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ownership of the talks process, and always blamed other people for the lack of progress.

Ms Sagar returned to the Prime Minister's question about voting habits in Northern Ireland. The problem was that there was not enough competition to the traditional parties. Voting habits were largely determined by family and tribal habits. The extra choice had been one of the advances of the Forum elections. She had to add that many people in Northern Ireland saw the UUP as having the British Government in their pocket.

The Prime Minister said this was not the case, as would be evident from even a cursory look at voting habits in Westminster. He asked what the Coalition would do if they were in his place. There were moves he could make, but they could easily force one of the big parties out and this would hardly help. Ms. Hinds said that the Government should protect the talks and the position of the independent chairmen, and ensure that the talks did not come to a premature close. A clear message to the UUP that their position on decommissioning was not shared by the Government would also help. The Government should also try to resolve decommissioning before the election break, or at the very least the issue of Confidence Building Measures within that.

The Prime Minister said that he had no difficulty with any of these wishes, although he had to repeat that he could not force the parties to agree amongst themselves. The reality was that the big parties had an effective veto on progress. This could only be broken down through favourable events, the pressure of public opinion and Government persuasion. Trying to ride over the wishes of a big party was a risky business. This made the process frustrating, but he had no doubt it was worthwhile. In any case, it was the only way.

Ms. McWilliams said that she was greatly heartened by what the Prime Minister had said, but hoped that these messages could be got across more clearly. Mrs. Blood asked whether the Government were trying to put the Loyalists out of the talks. Sir Patrick Mayhew denied this. We wanted all the parties in the talks, but questions did arise after the three apparently Loyalist attacks. The Government had to be careful about double standards and had wanted to put the Loyalist parties on notice that they could not avoid the issue. Nevertheless, the Government wanted them to stay in.

Ms. Sagar asked whether the Forum would stay in session if the talks were suspended. The UUP seemed to want this. If they put as much effort into the talks as they put into the Forum, the talks could have made much more progress. Sir Patrick Mayhew said that his clear expectation was that when the talks broke, the Forum would be suspended too. That was what the legislation said.

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The Prime Minister reverted to Ms. Hinds' opening remarks, and asked what role the Coalition thought the smaller parties could play in practice. Ms. Hinds said that the larger parties obviously had a bigger mandate, and had to be taken seriously. But this could be taken too far. The smaller parties could help to change the negotiating dynamics if they were encouraged. The Government could help to raise their status by taking more notice of them and involving them more. For example, they wanted to make an effort to rebuild cooperation about decommissioning. But one of the problems was that there was no history of cooperation between Northern Ireland parties.

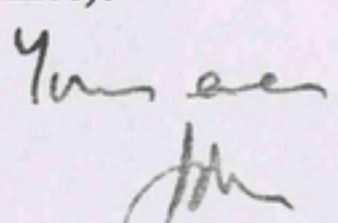
The Prime Minister asked how the Coalition saw the final outcome of the negotiations. Ms. McWilliams said that, however long it took, the result was bound to be on the lines of the Joint Framework Document. It was time all concerned faced up to this reality. The Prime Minister agreed. Ms. McWilliams added that the members of the Coalition had come a long way from the automatic views of their various backgrounds. If they could do it, others could do it too. She wanted to ask finally whether the Prime Minister foresaw any initiatives on Northern Ireland before the election. The Prime Minister said that he had views on how to make progress, but there was no point in floating ideas at this stage. They would simply be shot down by one or other party in present circumstances, which would make it impossible to run them after the election.

There was a brief discussion of press handling. The Prime Minister agreed that the Coalition could say that he had reaffirmed the Government's firm commitment to the Mitchell report and parallel decommissioning, the Government's full commitment to the talks, and their intention to keep them going without a premature close because of the election.

Comment

The Coalition representatives spoke clearly and well, and made a favourable impression. Their comments reinforced the view that one of the main obstacles to progress is the attitude of the leaderships of the traditional Northern Ireland parties.

I am copying this to William Ehrman (Foreign and Commonwealth Office) and to Jan Polley (Cabinet Office).


JOHN HOLMES

Ken Lindsay Esq
Northern Ireland Office

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