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From the Private Secretary

21 January 1997

Dear Gen,

MEETING WITH THE UUP, 21 JANUARY

David Trimble, accompanied by John Taylor and Martin Smyth, called on the Prime Minister at his request this afternoon. The Prime Minister was accompanied by Sir Patrick Mayhew and Michael Ancram. The meeting lasted some 50 minutes and was friendly throughout.

Security Situation

Trimble said that the RUC and Army were doing an excellent job, but the position was nevertheless worrying, particularly on the Loyalist side. He feared that the breakdown of the Loyalist ceasefire was only a matter of time. The message he heard from the Loyalists was that the death of a policeman or soldier would be enough to tip them over the edge. This might in turn spark off a pre-planned IRA response on a large scale. This had security implications, but also political implications: once the Loyalists had left the talks, he saw little or no prospect of movement because of the consensus rules. The only hope of keeping the Loyalist paramilitaries in check was to convince the wider Loyalist community that the Government had a pro-active approach to security.

The Prime Minister ran through the recent changes in the security profile (extra patrolling in Belfast, more vehicle check-points, extra security around RUC stations, town centres closed at night, etc). What else did Trimble have in mind? Sir Patrick Mayhew commented that he was very conscious of the need for an active security policy both for its own sake, and because of the effect it could have on confidence. His only reservation would involve measures which would be negative in real security terms. He had been discussing with his security advisers the possibility of closing some border crossings near Londonderry, and would continue to do so. But the security forces were keen to avoid presenting too many static targets to the terrorists.

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Trimble welcomed the idea of some border closures, particularly in the Londonderry area. This had been effective in the past. Taylor commented that he was less interested in practical security measures than in finding the right words to keep the Loyalists from further violence. It was not a foregone conclusion that one death would lead to the breakdown of the ceasefire. This was a decision still to be made, and a strong message to the Loyalist community about taking on the IRA head on could make a real difference. He thought that a full speech by Sir Patrick Mayhew would have more impact than doorstep comments to journalists, which did not always get much reported. The main point to get across was that the Government would not be pushed around by the terrorists, and would not change policy as a result of terrorism.

Sir Patrick Mayhew said that he would certainly consider this, but it was important that the Government response was not just empty words. On the practical side, one possibility, against the future chance of IRA attacks on economic targets, would be to reinstitute civilian searches. However, he was not keen on this, since it would hamper ordinary people. He preferred measures which directly hurt the IRA.

The Prime Minister wondered what checks on terrorist violence there might be. One was the obvious imminence of the election. Another was the US attitude to Sinn Fein. He suspected that the election was more likely to have an effect. Trimble did not respond to this point but commented that the IRA were bound to make a successful attack soon. This would provoke the Loyalists. If the more moderate Loyalists could argue that the authorities had the situation under control, this would help to restrain the others.

Smyth, in one of a number of unhelpful and hardline interventions, suggested that the only effective action would be some kind of return to internment, although he was well aware of the difficulties, not least Irish attitudes.

Taylor asked who we thought had been responsible for the Larne attack on 20 January. Sir Patrick Mayhew said that we believed that the first two under car bombs had been the responsibility of the UDA, although action had not necessarily been cleared at the highest level. We did not know yet about the latest attack. There might be an internal feud element. Smyth wondered whether there was collusion between terrorists on both sides, as had sometimes been the case in the past.

Sir Patrick Mayhew referred to the statement issued earlier that day, about the Loyalists. He had been anxious to show that there was no question of double standards in the Government's response to terrorism. Trimble agreed that this could be a real danger, with an obvious read-across to action that could be taken in the future against Sinn Fein.

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Belfast Talks

The Prime Minister said that the current lack of progress in the talks encouraged more violence. But it was not easy to see how the process could be moved forward. Could the Independent Chairmen play a role? Trimble agreed that there was deadlock. He saw little chance of forward movement, and was reticent about the idea of an initiative from the Independent Chairmen. The UUP had the impression that others were losing interest in the talks. They had had their people at Castle Buildings throughout since the New Year resumption, but had had few requests for bilaterals. Other parties had been absent. Nevertheless they wanted to explore whether something could be done to maintain the credibility of political action, even if the formal talks were stuck. They had worked up some ideas on involving Northern Ireland politicians in decision making, and had produced a first draft of a paper. (He handed over the attached copy.) They had tried to cover SDLP interests, although they had not yet talked to them about it. He would be seeing Seamus Mallon that evening, but would not give him the paper. The UUP feared that, if these ideas had too obvious UUP fingerprints on them, this would put others off. He hoped we would study the draft and let the UUP have our reactions quickly. There was not much time to lose.

Taylor added that even the Irish seemed to be losing interest in the talks and to be increasingly expecting an early election in the Republic. Sir Patrick Mayhew agreed that there had been a loss of enthusiasm in some quarters. Nevertheless it was important to keep the talks going, not least to ensure that there was an incentive for the Loyalists to refrain from violence. Trimble agreed. That was why the UUP wanted to avoid the formal suspension of the talks for as long as possible(!) However this could not be done through a process of bilaterals and plenaries which were in practice phoney.

The Prime Minister asked whether the UUP believed it would be easier to get out of the present deadlock after the election. Trimble said that it was likely that the same problem would be there. The reason for the deadlock was that the Irish and the SDLP gave more priority to getting Sinn Fein into the process than to the process itself. The Prime Minister commented that the Irish were currently giving a cold shoulder to Sinn Fein, as were the US. Smyth suggested that this meant the talks should simply move on without Sinn Fein, with the agreement of all concerned.

The Prime Minister noted that John Hume was still working on language which he believed could bring about a new ceasefire. But there was no doubt in practice that this was flogging a dead horse. Trimble said that he had not seen the Hume language, but Hume's constant statements, that all that was needed from Sinn Fein was a ceasefire and signing up to the Mitchell principles, were not helpful. Sir Patrick Mayhew agreed. We had made clear

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to Hume that the situation was not such that forms of words could help. But he was not easy to keep quiet.

Sir Patrick continued that, if there was agreement that the talks should be kept in being for now and only brought to a temporary close on a positive note, there were good grounds for working to find a way round the decommissioning blockage. We might be in a position to make some suggestions on this in the near future. Trimble did not respond directly but repeated that, while he assumed the talks would break as soon as the formal election campaign started, he did not want them just grinding away with no possibility of a result. If movement on the major issues was not possible, he thought there would be merit in progress in the areas the UUP were suggesting, to show that there could be political progress of some kind.

Sir Patrick Mayhew said that he could see a case for this but there was a real risk of the SDLP throwing in the towel if there was no progress in the talks themselves.

Smyth commented that all concerned needed something to get their teeth into. He wondered whether the Forum might play a greater role. Could it be changed into more of a political assembly, after the election if not now? Trimble commented that the Forum was beginning in any case to move on to more useful activity, now that the DUP had relaxed their block on this.

Sir Patrick Mayhew repeated that there was still a chance of making progress on decommissioning. Trimble said that there would be great difficulties if we tried to change the agenda, or dealt with issues only partially. He did not see much chance of progress on that sort of basis. Michael Ancram commented that, while our thoughts were not yet complete, we were trying to put together a package which would meet the UUP's concerns, in particular by helping to ensure that there would be decommissioning during the negotiations. We would meanwhile look at the UUP's ideas, but he feared that the SDLP would not be interested unless they saw a separate prospect of getting the talks into the three strands.

The Prime Minister said that, if we could not make progress in the present talks, there was an obvious danger of the SDLP and the Irish coming up with completely new talks ideas after the election, perhaps with US and Labour Party support. He had no evidence that this was happening, but it would cause great difficulty if it did. This reinforced the need to find the way through the decommissioning stumbling block. Trimble repeated the need for an early response to the UUP's ideas. Michael Ancram promised this but also proposed to meet Trimble on Thursday to look at our ideas on decommissioning. This was agreed.

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There was a brief discussion on what was likely to happen when the plenary resumed on 27 January. Sir Patrick Mayhew said that he assumed the focus would be on Loyalists' participation, even if none of the parties raised this formally. It was important to recognise the formal position, which was that, whatever the position of the CLMC, the Loyalist parties could not be expelled unless they had demonstrably dishonoured their undertakings.

Trimble concluded by asking about the North Report and the timing of its publication. (He did not ask what was in it.) Sir Patrick Mayhew said that he expected the Report by the end of January and believed it would be published then.

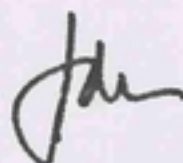
The Prime Minister finished by saying that he looked forward to seeing Trimble again on Thursday to discuss the Education Boards. Would he want to raise any more political subjects while the four leaders were there? Trimble began to wonder about the merits of this, but was cut short by Taylor.

Comment

Although the UUP side avoided saying anything direct about decommissioning, their body language was pretty negative, and the priority they attach to their own ideas evident. But there was an implicit deal that each side would at least consider the ideas of the other for progress. Another notable feature of the meeting was the evident competition, and lack of agreement in some areas, between Trimble and Taylor. To my mind, Taylor appeared more confident of his own position than in other similar meetings.

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

Yours are



JOHN HOLMES

Ken Lindsay Esq
Northern Ireland Office.

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