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LONDON SW1A 2AA

From the Private Secretary

25 September 1996

Dear Ken,

NORTHERN IRELAND: IRISH VIEWS

Paddy Teahon rang me earlier today to touch base on the main issues. He was pleased by the telephone call between the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach, which he saw as ensuring personal relations were on an even keel after the summer.

On the talks, he said that the Irish Government still found it very difficult to know which way Trimble would jump on decommissioning. He thought there was a divergence of views between the British and Irish about this. The Irish were nervous that Trimble consistently pocketed concessions and asked for more. They were not sure about his position on the decommissioning sub-committee, on the proposed verification commission or on his possibly revived demand for "benchmarking". They thought Trimble might still need influencing in the right way, not least before his meeting with his colleagues on Saturday. The Prime Minister might be able to play a role here.

I took note of all this. Our impression was that Trimble was serious about making progress but he was under pressure. We would do what we could to ensure the right decision. Teahon commented that, if Trimble rejected the joint British/Irish document, it was not clear where the talks could go from there. Meanwhile, if Trimble wanted to change the package on offer, even in minor ways, this would have to be referred to the Taoiseach. Teahon would want to discuss this with me.

Teahon went on that Irish officials were meeting Sinn Fein again on 26 September. The Sinn Fein team would be led by McGuinness (presumably because Adams was launching his book elsewhere). The Irish regarded this as a good sign, since McGuinness's presence meant that decisions could be taken. In setting up the meeting, Sinn Fein had made a lot of the difficulties caused by the Taoiseach's remarks in Washington about a ceasefire. But they had also made clear that a ceasefire was still there to be had in the right circumstances.

*Ken Lindsay, Esq.,
Northern Ireland Office.*

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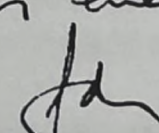
I said that we remained extremely sceptical. Teahon would understand that this scepticism had inevitably been reinforced by the arms find on Monday. Teahon said that our scepticism was shared by the Taoiseach himself. But there was a distinct impression in Dublin that the Southern Command of the IRA was on a different track from the Belfast leadership. The question was which group got to their destination first, the war party or the peace party. I commented that this seemed too simplistic a division. We continued to see little evidence of IRA readiness for a ceasefire, particularly at lower levels in the organisation.

Teahon went on to ask about our response to Hume. This was clearly an important part of the approach to a possible ceasefire. If we could make the right statement, and the talks could be separately moved on to the three-stranded political discussions, this could be a positive defining moment in the peace process. I explained where we were on the response to Hume. I did not think, to be honest, that there was much chance that a statement by us would lead to a ceasefire. It was much more likely that Sinn Fein would respond that our statement was not what they had been looking for, and would try to get into a negotiation. Teahon again commented that the Taoiseach took the same view. But he hoped nevertheless that we would keep the Irish Government and the Americans fully informed. They could then tell Sinn Fein that our response was in their view entirely valid. We should not give Sinn Fein any chance to divide the three Governments. I said that we were well aware of this and would indeed keep them in close touch.

Comment

I propose to send Teahon and Lake copies of the Prime Minister's response to Hume as soon as it has issued, making clear that the text is not negotiable and that it is now for Sinn Fein to make good on their undertakings. This is obviously relevant to the timing of our statement. We do not want to give too much time to Hume, Sinn Fein and the other two Governments to get together to put pressure on us to change what we propose to say.

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

Yours ever


JOHN HOLMES

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