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PRIME MINISTER

NORTHERN IRELAND

From: John Holmes

Date: 18 February 1997

More difficulties with Trimble, who rang me this afternoon. He had two main concerns:

- i. on the Grand Committee, he was worried that what was going to be proposed was not as closely in line with the Scottish Grand Committee as he would like. His particular concern was the extent to which the Grand Committee could discuss and amend legislation. He wanted to talk to someone about this in more detail;
- ii. on the talks, he had heard worrying reports from Belfast. The chairmen appeared to be lining up with the four minor parties to push forward ideas on decommissioning, which were essentially those of the SDLP. (These ideas concern the modalities of decommissioning.) If this went on, the UUP would have to say very firmly that these ideas were not acceptable. This might lead to a hard landing for the talks next week, rather than the soft landing everyone wanted.

I said that I would look into both of these issues and get back to Trimble.

I subsequently spoke to the NIO. They confirmed that their intention on the Grand Committee was to go ahead with the five proposals they had originally

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

- 2 -

+ leaving out all
NI members, 7 recall.

made, plus the inclusion of Lords' Ministers in sessions of the Committee. If the Lord President and others agreed, they would publish a Motion to amend the Standing Orders of the House in a few days.

// A. refer
to the
on timing.

I asked what was happening about Trimble's ideas on the legislative front, which Paddy Mayhew had told Trimble last week would be looked at. They said that they were indeed being looked at, but it became clear that they see pretty insuperable problems about them. There are differences between Scotland, where the separate Scottish legislation is essentially trivial, and Northern Ireland, where this is not always the case. There is also no Standing Committee to take Third Readings, unlike in Scotland. More fundamentally, the NIO say that the UUP's ideas are deliberately integrationist and likely to be wholly unacceptable to the SDLP and the Labour Party. They were therefore not inclined to make proposals on the lines the UUP wanted, to allow the Grand Committee the right to amend legislation, although they had not formally ruled this out. Allowing the Grand Committee to make proposals for amendments, most of which would no doubt be accepted, might be different. (is that offered in the package?)

On the talks, the NIO said that the position was indeed close to that described by Trimble. The chairmen were trying to look for ways of making progress, however minor. Essentially, the UUP were not interested in making any move, and were perceived by all the other parties as such. The NIO wanted the UUP to feel a bit of pressure on this front.

Paddy Mayhew subsequently rang me himself to grumble about this further attempt by Trimble to use No.10 to put pressure on the NIO. He was not

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

- 3 -

inclined to pander further to unworkable UUP views, etc. (All this was said in a friendly way, but there was no disguising his irritation.)

This leaves us in an uncomfortable position. On the substance, the NIO are no doubt right. Politically, Trimble is trying everything he can and no doubt aiming too high, but he cannot be ignored. I can fudge the talks point in going back to Trimble, but the Grand Committee is more difficult. The NIO drew justifiable attention to your agreement with Paddy Mayhew last Thursday that we should be prepared to accommodate Trimble on outside members of the Grand Committee, but not on the legislative front. It is also not clear whether Tony Newton and others would favour action in the direction wanted by Trimble, although I have not yet been able to check this.

Yes

Perhaps we could have a word about how to handle this. The obvious answer is for Ancram/Mayhew to go through all this again with Trimble, so that at least the talking goes on. Alternatively, we could bring Cranborne into play again. Or you might try to see Trimble yourself (you told Cranborne last week that you were prepared to do this, once the BSE vote was out of the way). But whatever procedure we adopt, we will have to make our minds up about how far we are prepared to satisfy Trimble on the Grand Committee.

John

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