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file
cc ED
SUBJECT
MASTER
Filed on:

From the Private Secretary

19 December 1996

Dear Gen,

MEETING WITH THE UUP, 19 DECEMBER

At their request, David Trimble and John Taylor called on the Prime Minister this afternoon for some 50 minutes. Sir Patrick Mayhew and Michael Ancram were there on our side.

Trimble said that he wanted to talk not about the present situation but about how to manage the next few months in the context of the talks. He saw no prospect as things stood of resolving decommissioning on terms satisfactory to the UUP. It would not therefore be possible to go into the three strands in the next couple of months. There had appeared to be an opportunity for progress a couple of weeks before, but this had not materialised as expected. He did not want to see the process disappear, but also wanted to avoid a position where, in order to keep the process alive, the UUP were pushed into what would be seen by others as concessions. There was a risk, if this was handled the wrong way, that McCartney would get what he wanted, namely the end of the process. Thought needed to start about this now, rather than in January.

The Prime Minister said that, whatever was said in public, the reality was that the impending general election was bound to have an impact on the process. He was very aware of the danger of a move which would trigger a Unionist withdrawal from the talks through a domino effect, starting with McCartney. Whatever the rights and wrongs, the UUP would then be seen as responsible for the breakdown of the talks. No one wanted to be left with the blame, expect possibly McCartney. He therefore assumed that the UUP wanted something from the process which would show the importance to Unionism of the UUP staying in.

Trimble said this was correct. But he could only stay in the talks before the election if he could point out to people a real and practical reason for doing so. This could not just be the value of talking. The UUP had already kept the

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talks going on three separate occasions, despite the pressures from Paisley and McCartney. They could not easily do so again. Taylor added that all the other parties were lining up to attack the UUP. A recent RTE programme had been a particularly obvious example of this.

Michael Ancram asked about the future timeable. The talks were stuck on decommissioning. How long could the parties go on going round in the same circles? Trimble said that he saw little or no prospect of reaching agreement with the SDLP, given the clear differences of view between the two parties. But in practice the only two issues to discuss were decommissioning and the agenda. Something bland could be said on the latter, as had already been agreed with the SDLP, but this would not take things very far.

Sir Patrick Mayhew wondered whether there might not still be a prospect of making progress on decommissioning. Mitchell might make a renewed effort to bridge the gap in the New Year. The SDLP might be able to move further. Trimble was doubtful. The SDLP kept trying to recreate the fourth strand, as Spring had originally proposed. The UUP had been prepared to concede a liaison committee for face-saving reasons, but the SDLP were intent on giving it more substance. He knew the SDLP could not accept the UUP position on decommissioning, but he was not asking them to. Equally, however, the UUP should not be asked to abandon its own position. The Independent Commission idea was of some interest, but Ken Maginnis had become fixated by this, and for some reason best known to himself thought that its creation would be a major step forward. This was not true in reality. In any case, the real issue behind all this was the Sinn Fein entry procedures. These had not yet been explored fully, although he knew it would be difficult.

The Prime Minister asked whether there was a decommissioning outcome with which the UUP could live. Trimble said that they could live with the UUP's own policy or something very close to it, but nothing else. They had hoped HMG was moving closer to their position, but they had not moved far enough.

The Prime Minister asked what the UUP wanted. It was clear that neither they nor the Government wanted the talks to collapse, but we needed to know what would protect the UUP position against challenges from others. The UUP were not of course the only actors. He had a feeling that the IRA would declare a new ceasefire before the election. It would be tactical and regarded as such by us, but would trap the SDLP into a situation where they would lose out electorally whether or not there was an electoral alliance. The IRA might go for such a ceasefire in late January.

Trimble said that he agreed with the analysis, but thought the IRA would want to go out with several bangs. It might take them till February to do this,

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on present form. If there were a ceasefire, that would itself remove all prospect of progress in the talks. The Nationalist side would simply wait for Sinn Fein to enter, while Unionist voters would move to the hardest line position possible.

Trimble finally got to the point. The UUP believed the Government should suspend the talks in late January so that the process was still in existence, even if no talks were going on. The talks could then resume after the election. This would be far preferable to a situation where McCartney could force a negative determination to decommissioning. Progress would not be possible after the end of January in any case because of the imminence of the election.

Sir Patrick Mayhew said this would be difficult. The plenary was not due to resume until 27 January, and had to be given a further reasonable period of time to make progress before it could be suspended. He hoped the UUP were also aware that suspension of the talks would involve a suspension of the Forum.

Taylor said that he accepted this as inevitable. Nevertheless, he repeated that the talks should be suspended by the end of January. They could then be resumed as soon as possible after the election. Michael Ancram wondered whether it would not be preferable from the UUP's point of view to find a way round decommissioning and at least start on the three strands before suspension. Trimble said that he did not see this as possible. Taylor reinforced this. A timetable for discussion beyond the end of January would be unhelpful. Suspending the talks then would be seen by all concerned as reasonable. This might sound like a negative position, but it was realistic.

The Prime Minister said that the end of January was too soon for suspension. It would mean suspending the talks for up to 3 months, which would strike people as unreasonably long. There would also have to be a reason for suspending the talks. Michael Ancram added that the Loyalists had given a clear warning that if there were no talks in being it would be much more difficult to hold back the Loyalist Paramilitaries. Taylor commented that the Loyalists seemed more relaxed now about the ceasefire than they had a couple of weeks before.

The Prime Minister said that it was difficult to be sure how a suspension of the talks so early would be seen by all concerned. The relationship of a suspension to a possible ceasefire needed to be thought through. Would a suspension before a ceasefire be seen as an attempt to avoid the dilemma a ceasefire would bring? Would a suspension after a ceasefire be seen as too obviously dodging the problem? He would like to reflect further on the alternatives. He hoped the UUP would do so too. The important thing was to have a game in the town to return to after the election.

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Trimble said that they would think further. But they were convinced that going on after the end of January would not be a good idea. It would become much more difficult to suspend the talks once the IRA declared a tactical ceasefire, because it would be seen as a device to keep them out. The UUP would be there when the bilateral talks resumed on 13 January. But if the gaps between the position of the UUP and those of the SDLP and HMG could not be closed before the plenary resumed, the talks should be suspended on 27 January. Taylor added that it would in any case be difficult to continue with the talks when the Parliamentary situation would force the UUP MPs to spend more time in Westminster.

The meeting concluded with a brief discussion of press handling. Trimble said that he would be refusing interviews and would tell the waiting journalists only that there had been a broad discussion of the position reached in the talks and the prospects when they resumed. The Prime Minister saw no difficulty with this.

Comment

Trimble and Taylor took a long time to get round to it, but their message about suspending the talks was in the end quite clear, as were the electoral reasons for it. They fear being put in a difficult position when the talks resume, and therefore want to ensure this does not happen. This leaves us with an awkward dilemma. It is not easy to see what incentives we can offer the UUP to keep the talks going. If we nevertheless try to do so, they will be tempted to bring the process to an end one way or another.

The Christmas break provides a natural opportunity for reflection. It would be helpful to have considered advice on where we go from here by Tuesday 7 January at the latest. The Prime Minister expects to be overseas from 8 to 14 January, and we will need to agree a broad strategy before he departs.

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

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John

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