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10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA

bc 25 14
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From the Private Secretary

13 March 1997

SUBJECT
MASTER

Filed on:

Dear Ken,

TELEPHONE CONVERSATION WITH THE TAOISEACH

The Prime Minister and the Taoiseach spoke on the telephone this afternoon for some 25 minutes. The tone on both sides was very friendly.

The Taoiseach said that he had been keen to have a word before his visit to Washington for St. Patrick's Day. He wanted to discuss what he could say to President Clinton in Washington. It was useful for him to say that he had spoken to the Prime Minister, even if they were not able to agree on anything. He wanted to discuss in particular prospects for the talks and the possibility (not the probability) of a new IRA ceasefire.

As far as the talks were concerned, they had made a reasonable amount of progress in the early days, but had then run into difficulties over decommissioning, not least because of the imminence of the British General Election. He was keen that the period before the resumption of talks on 3 June should be used by the two Governments to make it possible to move the talks forward more quickly. It would help create confidence if the two Governments were seen to be actively preparing for the resumption. It was certainly useful for him domestically for that perception to be there.

The Taoiseach confirmed that he had several proposals to make:

- (i) he hoped that between now and the resumption of the talks, officials could look together at how the decommissioning impasse could be broken, in the light of the recommendations of the Mitchell Report;
- (ii) he would also like officials to be asked to draw up proposals for a timeframe or calendar for negotiations, although this would of course be

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subject to the readiness of the parties to agree such a timeframe. The aim would be to impart a sense of urgency to the talks;

- (iii) he also hoped that it could be agreed that there would be an Anglo/Irish Summit at some suitable point after the resumption of the talks. The date would need to be set to allow a period of talks long enough to get a genuine sense of whether the talks were going to move forward or not. A Summit would provide a fixed point towards which the talks would be working;
- (iv) he hoped it could be agreed that, although the Strand 3 talks could not of course start until the first two Strands were under way, officials might nevertheless be asked to start thinking about how the Strand 3 talks might be tackled.

The Taoiseach concluded that, if a package along these lines could be agreed, it would show that there was a positive basis for the resumption of the talks. He was not asking the Prime Minister to agree to all this immediately, and understood that it might be easier to say more about such plans a little later. But he was anxious that the two governments should appear pro-active.

The Prime Minister said that he would need to reflect on these ideas. But his immediate reactions were that, on Strand 3, he saw no difficulty in official level discussions. This would be no more in a sense than prudent forward planning. As far as a Summit was concerned, he would welcome this. For his part, he thought it would be better to avoid an elaborate summit with large numbers of officials in attendance. This would only rouse expectations. It would be better for the two of them to spend a day together informally, either at Chequers or at the Irish end, in order to review prospects in depth. Of course they would need to speak to the press at the end, but there would not need to be a formal communiqué.

As far as a timeframe was concerned, he wanted to reflect further. He was not sure that it made sense to set deadlines which the awkward squad on either side could manipulate to their advantage. On the decommissioning point he had no objection to officials discussing this, but this might be best left private, since it would otherwise give rise to the usual allegations about a stitch up and suspicions of back door deals to be imposed by the two governments.

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The Taoiseach said that he was not asking the Prime Minister to agree to a timeframe now, but only that officials should discuss how such an idea could be taken forward, for example how the various bits of negotiations would relate to each other in timing terms. He certainly did not want to put the talks in any kind of straight-jacket, or put in place a wall into which they would inevitably crash. Nor was there any question of imposing a timeframe.

The Prime Minister said that his caution related in part to the separate discussions we were having with John Hume. These were awkward for us, particularly if we were seen to be negotiating in some way. Clearly there was no question of throwing away a real opportunity for a ceasefire, if one was there, but final decisions had still not been taken on how to handle the questions. Hume had in any case been asked to put them in a separate letter in a way which showed that they clearly came from him. He was nervous about the conjunction of these discussions, the result of which would obviously need to be made public, and making announcements of the sort the Taoiseach was proposing.

The Taoiseach said that he understood. He would certainly not insist that the discussions about decommissioning be made public, although he would hope that something could be said publicly before too long about the other three ideas he had put forward. He repeated that the aim was to inject a sense of urgency into the peace process. He said that the Irish side would send us some words to look at.

The Prime Minister welcomed this. Rather than any kind of joint announcement, we might aim for a page of agreed script from which both sides would speak as appropriate. The Taoiseach said he fully agreed.

The Taoiseach reverted to the possibility of a new IRA ceasefire. If the British Government could say that, if there was a genuine IRA ceasefire now, with the right follow-up, then Sinn Fein could be in the talks when they resumed in June, this would obviously be helpful. But he knew this was not easy.

The Prime Minister said that we had never been looking for a long delay before Sinn Fein joined the talks, once a credible ceasefire had been declared. But there were indeed difficulties about setting a date, for example if this allowed the IRA to declare a ceasefire relatively late on and then claim that they should

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be let in. The Taoiseach was asking us to make a significant shift in our position. The Taoiseach said that it should surely be possible to make clear that only a ceasefire in the immediate future would mean that Sinn Fein could join in June.

The Prime Minister said that we were alive to this problem, and to others, but we had not yet devised a good solution. Ministers had discussed recently whether a date could be given, and had not agreed to this. It might be easier if it emerged from a follow-up round of questions. In any case, we were bound by statute to let Sinn Fein into the talks if the conditions laid down were met. But we did not want to trail our coat after the IRA, not least after the acts of violence they had committed. The Taoiseach expressed understanding for this.

The Taoiseach said that the Irish side were continuing to work on the new evidence about Bloody Sunday. But he had nothing particular to add to what he had said last time. The Prime Minister said that he had asked for the new material to be reviewed with an open mind. But the process was complicated by the application for a Judicial Review of the Widgery Tribunal.

The Prime Minister said that the Taoiseach might have seen that it had been announced that Roisin McAliskey would be allowed to keep her baby. He had been aware of the Taoiseach's interest and had kept a close eye on this. The Taoiseach said that this was indeed welcome news. The Provisionals had been denied a powerful propaganda weapon.

Comment

This was a bounce from the Taoiseach. Paddy Teahon had not warned me to expect specific proposals of this kind, and I assume nothing similar had emerged from the IGC either. This was presumably deliberate. The Prime Minister's response was very mild in the circumstances. I was unable to speak to Paddy Teahon afterwards as he was at Cheltenham for the day(!), but Wally Kirwan said the Irish would send us a short piece of paper as promised. I will forward this when it arrives, but you may like to start thinking rapidly about how we should respond to the Taoiseach's ideas. I would be grateful for rapid advice.

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I took steps after the conversation to try to ensure that as little as possible was said to the press about its contents by the Irish, given what happened last time. But I am not entirely confident about the results.

I am copying this to William Ehrman (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), Jan Polley (Cabinet Office), Sir John Kerr (Washington) and Veronica Sutherland (Dublin).

Yours ever



JOHN HOLMES

Ken Lindsay, Esq.
Northern Ireland Office

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