

18. Jul. 1997 19:51

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John Holmes Esq
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18 July 1997

Dear John,

NORTHERN IRELAND

Thank you for your letter of earlier today recording the Prime Minister's initial reflections following yesterday's meeting with Trimble.

The view here is that there is indeed some danger of losing the Unionists in the vote on the two Government's decommissioning proposals, but that was always going to be the crunch point. We need to play the end game carefully, aiming to:

- deny Trimble the easy option of walking away on the basis that the two Governments could not meet a reasonable request;
- avoid any sign of a split between us and the Irish (which would also suit Trimble) and maintain consistency with what we have said publicly and to Sinn Féin;
- maximise whatever chance there is of securing UUP support for the two Government's proposals.

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That suggests to us that the best tactical approach would be to:

- seek Irish support for a short statement, reflecting what is already clearly implicit in the two Governments' joint proposals, making clear that the two Governments will be working to achieve some actual decommissioning during the negotiations;
- put that to Trimble in circumstances which make entirely clear that it is the final offer; and that he now has to decide whether to support the joint proposals or see the end of the Forum and a rather different political process;
- but if we can't secure Irish support for such a statement, stand by the joint proposals, as we said we would.

The Irish will be difficult to budge, but perhaps not immovable. Mr Burke's basic analysis at today's IGC was that:

- it was already pretty obvious that the two Governments were talking about "actual" decommissioning, though not in any sense of guaranteeing it or making it a requirement for continued participation;
- there was no point playing "word games" if, as he believed, there was a 90% chance that Trimble wasn't serious and would ultimately refuse to sit down with Sinn Féin;
- it was crucial to bear "the bigger picture" in mind. (The Hume/Adams press release was delivered during the IGC). Nothing should be said to Trimble which would prejudice a ceasefire.

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CONFIDENTIAL**Possible Text**

On text the Irish accepted somewhat grudgingly that the two Governments might say they would be:

(1) "working for some mutual decommissioning alongside political progress",
and repeat that they

(2) "wanted to see the earliest possible decommissioning of illegal weapons".

We sought their reaction to:

(3) "Without some actual decommissioning during the negotiations alongside political progress, we cannot [in the context of inclusive negotiations] see the necessary trust and confidence being built for a successful and agreed outcome to the negotiations".

This was too strong for them although they said that putting the same thought on a positive basis might be acceptable (i.e., presumably, something like, "The achievement of some actual decommissioning during inclusive negotiations alongside progress on substantive political issues would contribute very significantly to building the trust and confidence necessary for a successful and agreed outcome").

We also pressed them to consider inserting the word "actual" before "mutual" in the first formula. That triggered an adjournment and a telephone call to the Taoiseach, but he was unable to support the amended formula "given the circumstances" (presumably a reference to the hopes engendered by the Hume/Adams press release).

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CONFIDENTIAL**The pitch to Mr Ahern**

A further approach from the Prime Minister may be more effective. Additional arguments he might deploy include:

- an IRA ceasefire may well be on the cards. The tactic of tackling all Sinn Féin's stated concerns seems to be working
- if it comes off it would be highly desirable to have a credible process in place with the UUP still directly engaged - at the negotiating table with Sinn Féin
- can't say whether Trimble will rise to the challenge. He would clearly face immense problems with his party and his community. He is a volatile character. We have already met what he characterised as his single most fundamental concern about the paper of 25 June (namely that the machinery for decommissioning should be in place by 15 September) and now he has come up with another point of difficulty. But we should not give him an easy way out
- as things stand he can credibly claim that the two Governments are not prepared to say that they will be working to achieve "actual decommissioning". He will have a free exit on that basis and it will be difficult subsequently to separate him from the DUP and UKUP

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- it's as plain as a pikestaff from reading Mitchell, the joint proposals of 25 June and the clarification tabled on 16 July that the two Governments hope to see some actual decommissioning during the negotiations, have put the necessary mechanisms in place and will be working to achieve just that (assuming progress in the substantive political negotiations), accepting that they cannot guarantee it and do not make it a requirement of continued participation
- if we can simply acknowledge that fact by saying that in the context of inclusive negotiations "the two Governments will be working to achieve some actual mutual decommissioning alongside progress on the substantive political issues", we will really put Trimble to the test. As with Sinn Féin, we should go the extra mile in addressing his stated concerns. [A possible fallback would be for the two Governments to scotch the notion that they would only be working to achieve "consideration" of decommissioning.]
- we appreciate and share Irish concerns about the possible impact on the prospects for an IRA ceasefire but a statement on those lines would be consistent with what we have said to Sinn Féin.

Reverting to Trimble

If the Taoiseach agrees, that would provide a platform for next week's meeting with Trimble. The Prime Minister can of course reiterate the potential benefits for Unionism of staying with the current Talks process (devolution; reasonable North/South arrangements; a new Agreement; reinforcement of Northern Ireland's place in the Union, including constitutional change in the Republic). He could point to the efforts made to meet the UUP's point on the mechanisms for decommissioning, and (if the Taoiseach

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agrees) unveil the proposed text on "actual decommissioning". This is only likely to work if Trimble is clear that it is a final offer. Additionally the Prime Minister might point out that:

- whatever happens, the two Governments are determined to move on to a consideration of substantive issues on 15 September. The present process offers the UUP their best opportunity to influence developments, but that requires there to be an agreed resolution of the decommissioning issue;
- if the UUP parts company with the two Governments just as the IRA declare a ceasefire it would play into the hands of the Republican Movement. If the ceasefire is credible HMG will stand by the commitment in the aide memoire to bring them into negotiations. We need to test their bona fides in open discussion and would be a far more rigorous test if the UUP were there;
- if there is no agreement on decommissioning on 23 July, it would become necessary to reconsider the future of the Forum.

On this last point, the Forum must be wound up, by Order, if the talks are suspended, and may be wound up at any stage. If the necessary Order is to be approved by both Houses before the recess, it would need to be laid by the end of next week. The fate of the talks might not be finally clear at that point but without agreement on decommissioning the prospects for making further progress in that format would be very bleak. To guard against the risk of the Unionist-dominated Forum meeting in continuous and critical session throughout September and October (until Parliament resumes) it would be sensible to close it down before the recess. It formally adjourned today until Friday 5 September.

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Adjourning the talks

A further point to bear in mind in the days ahead is that the Aide Memoire we gave Sinn Féin on 13 June said that if there were a ceasefire we expected participants would wish to consider adjourning the talks. The main reasons for that were that the participants would probably be mesmerised by the prospect of Sinn Féin's arrival and that Sinn Féin would not be "humiliated" by being held outside an on-going process. In fact, in present circumstances, with business scheduled up to 29 July and then a summer break, the balance of the argument is probably in favour of continuing the business and having the crucial vote on decommissioning on 23 July as planned.

Plan B

You mentioned the need to disabuse the Irish of any view that we could move smoothly to Plan B without the support of the UUP. We will of course work hard up to the wire to achieve success on Plan A. But it is a real possibility that we will need to move to Plan B, and perhaps before the Summer break. Of course under Plan B it will be equally important to secure Unionist participation and the Irish fully recognise that. But the Plan B consultative process has the benefit that it cannot be vetoed, that it could get off the ground without active Unionist participation. However, it is difficult to see how the Unionists could justify staying out of it for long. It demands much less of them: they need only take part, at least at first, in consultations with HMG. They do not have to meet other parties, still less Sinn Féin. The question is how long could the Unionist parties refrain from joining consultations with HMG, particularly in a situation where a ceasefire is sustained, and the Government is moving towards proposals which, among other things, would replace the Anglo-Irish Agreement which they complained was imposed without consulting them and the renegotiation of which has been their central objective.

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CONFIDENTIAL**Other Avenues**

We believe that the clarifications offered on 16 July fully meet Trimble's point about needing to put the necessary mechanisms in place. In any event the Irish have no further room for manoeuvre. We could assure Trimble privately that our security experts certainly do have a lot of material about possible draft schemes for decommissioning, which they could share with the Commission over the Summer.

We doubt whether Mitchell will be drawn further on what his report means. His 'Frost' interview was clear but he is unlikely to repeat it.

Beyond the points covered above we will of course be promoting the widest possible support in the broader Unionist community (Church leaders, businessmen etc) for reaching a reasonable agreement on decommissioning, and will consider what points we can register with the media which may exert a positive influence on the UUP leadership.

An outside chance might be to seek to enlist the influence of the US Administration. They might encourage Trimble to support the Governments' proposal and (just possibly) reassure him that the context of inclusive negotiations they would use their influence to support the two Governments' efforts to achieve [some actual] decommissioning alongside progress in the three strands.

I am sending copies of this letter to William Eherman (FCO), Jan Polley (Cabinet Office), Veronica Sutherland (Dublin) and Sir John Kerr (Washington).

Yes ever
John McKervill
McKERVILL

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