



10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA

From the Private Secretary

7 May 1997

SUBJECT
MASTER

Filed on:

Dear Gen,

CALL BY THE UUP, 7 MAY

The Prime Minister decided that, before he saw the Taoiseach, he would like to touch base in person with David Trimble. Trimble therefore called on the Prime Minister in the House of Commons for 10 minutes this afternoon, accompanied by Geoffrey Donaldson. Jonathan Powell and I were there on our side.

Trimble began by thanking the Prime Minister for seeing him. This would be an important signal to the Unionist community. The Prime Minister said that in the ideal world he would not have been seeing the Taoiseach so soon, but he was in town anyway and a meeting could hardly be avoided. Trimble accepted this. But the Irish were busy trying to make something of the meeting and giving the impression that things were being done behind the backs of others.

The Prime Minister said that his aim was to sort out the Northern Ireland problem. He had no predilection whatsoever for a united Ireland, and he would want to find the right way of making this clear in due course.

Trimble welcomed this. There was considerable nervousness on doorsteps in Belfast about the views of the new government. He hoped the Prime Minister would be able to spell his approach out before the summer got under way, because this would help Northern Ireland get through the summer without serious trouble. He hoped the Prime Minister would reassure the people of Northern Ireland of his objectives and set out his principles. It would be better to stick to the level of principles, while saying relatively little about day to day issues in Northern Ireland. Above all, hostages to fortune and sudden moves should be avoided. There was for example considerable concern about the idea of radical change to the RUC, which appeared to respond to an IRA agenda.

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Returning to the talks, Trimble said that there was a desperate shortage of time before 3 June. A lot of thought needed to go into this, and he hoped to meet the Prime Minister again with more time available to go through the problems he saw, both about the talks process and the aim.

The Prime Minister asked where Trimble would want to see Northern Ireland in two or three years. Trimble said that he would want to see all the issues settled, with the claim in the Irish constitution removed, satisfactory cross-border cooperation, and a reasonable administration in place in Northern Ireland itself. The latter would involve some changes to local government, and a devolved assembly. He was not overly prescriptive about the assembly, and was ready to look at the range of powers it should have. But he thought they should be similar to what was planned for Wales and Scotland. It would be good to arrive at a situation where Northern Ireland politicians could get on with the issues politicians normally concerned themselves with.

Donaldson said that the framework of the settlement needed to be looked at. Previous governments had talked about the totality of relationships in the two islands. But the new Government's policies towards Wales and Scotland created an opportunity to set a new framework across Britain. The Prime Minister asked Trimble's view on where the IRA were going.

Trimble said that they were in some difficulty. A return to full-scale violence was not really possible. At the same time they could not really make the plunge into politics because they were not ready to abandon violence and espouse exclusively peaceful methods. They could become political at some stage, but this would require a split because there were some hard cases in the movement (as there were on the Protestant side too). All in all, he thought that if the Government stayed steady on the fundamentals, all would be well.

Donaldson added that the Prime Minister's emphasis on consent in the past, and the interpretation he had given of it, had been absolutely right. It would be important to repeat this in any speech. The Prime Minister said that the consent principle was fundamental. It was helpful in weakening the IRA that it was now accepted by everyone else. Trimble agreed but commented that the Sinn Fein vote was still going up.

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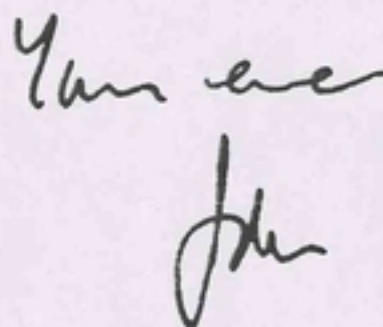
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The Prime Minister concluded that he would meet Trimble again before too long, when he hoped to be able to say more about his plans. He would certainly want to take an opportunity before the summer to demonstrate his complete commitment to the consent principle.

Comment

The atmosphere was very friendly, and Trimble and Donaldson clearly welcomed what the Prime Minister had to say. Their own approach was studiously reasonable, although both made comments which confirmed that they wish to change the basis of the talks process.

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

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'John Holmes', with a stylized, cursive script.

JOHN HOLMES

Ken Lindsay Esq
Northern Ireland Office

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