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PRIME MINISTER

NORTHERN IRELAND

From: John Holmes

Date: 25 July 1997

cc: JONATHAN POWELL
ALASTAIR CAMPBELL
PHILIP BARTON

- I should send a letter to Clinton saying 1) how he can help us & 2) he must keep up pressure on S.F. The Marshall was difficult. I will hear him*
1. I attach a new round-up minute from Mo. I agree with nearly all of it, although it still shows evidence of the NIO's inclination to take Nationalist concerns and sensitivities more seriously than those of the Unionists. Mo still prefers to avoid giving Trimble any hint that he may get a better offer on decommissioning. I have already told the NIO that you do not agree. You are seeing Trimble after Questions on Wednesday. I see no point in sending him now a letter as suggested in Mo's minute. It would certainly not help.
 2. On Sinn Fein, it is good that Mo is not now meeting them for at least another ten days. This should help to calm Unionists' nerves a little. She will also be meeting them when most Unionist leaders are on holiday, including Trimble.
 3. I think you should speak to Ahern early next week, and press him further on the Independent Commission. I do not think the NIO are trying hard enough, despite my efforts to stir them up.

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4. There is clearly some genuine disquiet, although I would discount talk of a split at this stage. Evidence of this disquiet will also be used by the Republicans, and by their sympathisers, to argue that we must be nice to Sinn

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PREM 49 / 113 Letter dated 25 July 1997

CONFIDENTIAL

- 2 -

Fein to ensure they keep the ceasefire together. There is something in this, but only up to a limited point.

The two decisions we will face at the end of August are:

(i) whether to invite Sinn Fein to join the talks. The truth is that they will have to do something pretty stupid if we are not to issue such an invitation. I agree with Mo that we should attempt to play down the significance of this decision.

(ii) how hard we want to try to get Trimble to vote for the decommissioning proposals, and how much we want to stick to the all-party talks format. We need not play up the significance of whether we go for plan A or plan B. To a large extent, the two options can merge into one another, with the all-party talks process still in being, while we pursue the substance in a different way.

We will have to try to bring the UUP along, but I continue to think that the Irish will be very reluctant to help us much. We should also bear in mind that, arguably, we may be better off in a plan B type format. If Trimble stays in, and all-party talks go on, they are almost certain to get stuck quickly, not least over decommissioning. We would then have to move on to plan B, having registered a failure to make progress already, and wasted some time. The choice may be clearer when you have seen Trimble.

One other general point worth bearing in mind: the NIO are always very keen for the two governments to drive the process together. We need to watch this. We certainly want a good working relationship with the Irish – it is difficult to make progress without it. But:

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

- 3 -

- an Anglo-Irish stitch-up is the Unionists' nightmare, following the Anglo-Irish Agreement and the Joint Framework Document;
- our interests are not the same as those of the Irish – they are part of the nationalist side;
- we are talking about the future of part of the UK. The Irish do not have equal rights or an equal say.



JOHN HOLMES

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