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File for 10/6.

From: John Holmes
Date: 30 May 1997

PRIME MINISTER

cc: Jonathan Powell
Philip Barton
Pat McFadden

NORTHERN IRELAND

*See my note.
These are fine
elements.
I prefer:
a) a speech table
with their concerns
rather than a
text. b) may be, hardening up
the pro-Union
parts of it.
→
NIO*

1. I have arranged a 45-minute meeting with Mo Mowlam, Paul Murphy, John Chilcot and Quentin Thomas on Monday morning, immediately before you see George Mitchell. The aim is to talk through the next steps with Sinn Fein, and to look at the handling of the talks which resume the following day.
2. As background I attach:
 - a minute from Mo received late this evening which sets out at some length the NIO strategy, including tabling a text with Sinn Fein and the Irish and US Governments, and a much earlier end-July date for Sinn Fein's entry into talks;
 - my letter recording your views on the previous draft NIO text, which you will detect have not gone down well in the NIO!
 - the record of the latest meeting between NIO officials and Sinn Fein. This conveys well the flavour of the exchanges, in particular the way in which Sinn Fein always tries to put the onus on us to meet their demands;
 - the NIO "game plan" for the resumption of the talks. This helps to bring out the main issues: above all, decommissioning; the delicate position of the Loyalists; and how to spin out the process convincingly in the period

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My basic view of this is
this:

1. That getting SF into talks is
vital & to avoid de-common. being a
problem i.e. be quite easy with SF on
this aspect;
2. Be v. hard with them on the
substantive repatriation, where I think
there wd be for greater pressure on them
never to go back to violence, based on
a failure to agree a repatriation.

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before Sinn Fein enter (if they do), when there may be no Irish Government in place for some weeks.

3.

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RETAINED UNDER SECTION 3 (4)
OF THE PUBLIC RECORDS ACT

4. The key issue for decision at Monday's meeting is whether to table a text at the next meeting with Sinn Fein, as very strongly recommended by Mo, or to go down your preferred route of a speech. A third option worth exploring, which could be combined with the second, is using the Americans to reinforce our oral assurances to Sinn-Fein that we understand their concerns and can respond to them, at least up to a point, once a genuine ceasefire is in place. It is worth noting that Sinn Fein have not asked us to table a new text, although they may still do so.
5. A speech from you with an explicit offer to Sinn Fein of a date, and some reassurances but in your own words, not agreed ones, has the advantage of putting the onus on them, where it belongs. In my view Clinton would have no option but to give you strong support. It would go down much better with the Unionists than a suspicious looking text obviously negotiated with Sinn Fein. But the NIO are right to point out that the risks of not achieving a ceasefire are higher.
6. Mo's minute is well argued. It represents a coherent approach. She could well be right, and what she suggests may well be worth trying. It would certainly call Sinn Fein's bluff. But I have to say it also represents very much an Irish view of the world, including something of an obsession with a new ceasefire as an end in

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itself, and a belief that at the end of the day the Unionists will just have to lump it. It does not bring out enough the real risks of the Unionists giving up on you altogether because you have moved too precipitately. For example it mentions the dangers of the marching season – but the real risk in the marching season is from the Unionists making the Province ungovernable.

I have made a few other comments in manuscript. But I find myself in a difficult position as someone inevitably associated with the last government's position, which did fail to achieve a renewal of the ceasefire. The NIO paper seems to me somewhat pointed about this, and I detect that I am clearly suspected of influencing you in the wrong direction.

Whatever the truth of this, you will want to test the NIO case with some tough questioning. If you go down their suggested route, you will be warmly applauded by the US and Irish Governments, and may well achieve a new ceasefire. Reaction in the media here will inevitably be mixed, but you can get away with it. The key test is not whether the Unionists are angry – they will be even if we go a bit slower, and they are by nature unreasonable - but whether they can be drawn back into the process afterwards because they will have to deal with you for at least five years. And the key judgment is whether we are in a political position such that we have in effect to meet Sinn Fein's demands, or whether they are themselves in difficulties and can be pushed to accept a tougher approach from us, with US help.

The other issue you may wish to explore a bit further in the meeting is decommissioning. There are endless complicated papers about this but they serve mostly to confuse. The NIO are supposedly producing a fresh proposal for the talks. You may like to ask Quentin Thomas to explain this to you.

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However complicated the papers, the issue is fairly simple. The Unionists want guarantees, before they get into serious political negotiations, that real decommissioning will take place because they believe that otherwise Sinn Fein is always retaining the violent option. We are also committed to the Mitchell approach of parallel decommissioning, but we are relatively flexible about implementation. Sinn Fein's view, covertly supported by the Irish, is that there is no question of serious decommissioning before a settlement is agreed. Can these positions be reconciled? If they can't be reconciled in substance, as is likely, is there a procedural way through which does not in effect concede that no decommissioning is likely to happen during the talks? No-one has yet found a convincing answer to this conundrum.

I agree with you that we should not be on this decommissioning hook, but we are - and we can't simply move away from it without seriously threatening our relations with the Unionists. That is why we have to find a subtle way through if we can.

Finally, on the subject of Unionists, I have fixed a meeting with Trimble on Wednesday afternoon. He and others are currently in South Africa, to learn how the ANC and National Party did it, until Monday evening. Sinn Fein are also there, but sealed off from the Unionists, which has caused much wry media comment about the new apartheid.

**JOHN HOLMES**