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Jan PSNey

Faxed to AU

7/7 at 16.15

From the Private Secretary

7 July 1997

Dear Sir,

CONVERSATION WITH THE TAOISEACH, 7 JULY

The Prime Minister and the Taoiseach spoke on the telephone for about ten minutes, shortly after 1300 today. The Prime Minister began by saying how grateful he was for the restraint the Taoiseach had shown in what he had said publicly about Drumcree. This had been much noticed and warmly welcomed. The situation we faced was bad, but we simply had to try to get through it as best we could, without wrecking the wider peace process.

Ahern agreed. He had told his colleagues that they should stay calm and work for calm, despite the deep disappointment he and they felt. But he was very concerned about the way the Chief Constable had been presenting the decision. Stress on the danger of Loyalist paramilitaries attacking Catholics was extremely unhelpful, since it suggested that might was right. Irish arguments to the Republican movement that killing or shooting did not advance their cause were undermined by these kinds of comments from the Chief Constable. He understood why he said these things, but, frankly, they were very damaging.

The Prime Minister said that he agreed. Ahern would have noticed that Dr Mowlam's presentation had been rather different. The constitutional position vis-a-vis the Chief Constable was tricky. Nevertheless we would try to reinforce the point with him. The underlying point about not banning the march was that there was a right to freedom of assembly. He wished profoundly that the Orange Order had not exercised this right at Drumcree, but this did not destroy the existence of the right. If it were not there, and the Orange Order were setting out to provoke or threaten, he would have no problems in banning them from doing so.

Ahern said that it was nevertheless difficult to accept that Catholic residents in the Garvaghy Road should be penned in for ten hours, and prevented even from going to mass, so that others were able to exercise their rights for twenty minutes. International observers on the ground had made this point, not just hard-liners.

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The line was broken at this point. When the conversation resumed, the Prime Minister said that he fully understood the point the Taoiseach was making. He went on to ask about the draft reply to Sinn Fein, which we had given Irish officials. Ahern said that there were positive things in the draft, but the Irish were working on some amendments to suggest to us. He hoped we would get them this afternoon. He hoped we would keep particularly in mind the sensitivity of the prisoners issue, particularly on Special Secure Units. Dr Mowlam had said she would be looking at this question, and at Bloody Sunday. Meanwhile, the immediate issue on the parades front was how the Lower Ormeau Road would be handled.

The Prime Minister said that we would be trying to negotiate a local accommodation. The Orange Lodge there might be less intransigent than in Portadown, but we could not of course guarantee success. Meanwhile, his impression was that the post-Drumcree rioting was not quite as bad as it had been the previous year. Ahern agreed, but one point of concern was the widespread use of plastic bullets. There seemed to be occasions when they were fired at people simply standing around. Obviously it was not sensible for people to stand around in riot situations, but if there was any way of restraining the use of plastic bullets, that would be helpful.

The Prime Minister said that he understood the point. It would of course be helpful on the other side if Sinn Fein were not telling people to get out on the streets. Ahern said that the Irish were making this clear in their contacts. He had also been putting across the same message in his interviews, including one just before he had spoken to the Prime Minister, counselling against any violent reaction.

The Prime Minister said that he was worried that Sinn Fein might use what had happened at Drumcree as a reason not to respond to the pressure for a ceasefire. It was important that that pressure should be maintained. Ahern said that events at Drumcree had undoubtedly given Sinn Fein a lift. But he also agreed with the Prime Minister that it was most important to maintain the wider peace process. He was convinced that the Sinn Fein leadership was interested in pursuing this and achieving a ceasefire.

Ahern went on that he had been disappointed to hear that Trimble had been taking the collection in the Drumcree church before the march. This was not exactly a helpful way to behave for someone in his position. In any case, it was important that Trimble now made a positive move on decommissioning, to help

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the peace process move forward. The Prime Minister said that, frankly speaking, it would not be easy to get Trimble to move. The Unionists were very negative about the decommissioning paper. But he entirely took the point the Taoiseach was making. His view was that, if the marching season could be got through without too much further damage, it might just be possible to hold Trimble in to the talks process. Ahern said that he would be working with Sinn Fein in the same sense.

The Prime Minister said that it would be helpful to tell the press that he and the Taoiseach had spoken, had kept each other informed of developments, and had agreed that the search for a lasting settlement should continue. Ahern welcomed this, and added that he understood Dr Mowlam and the Irish Foreign Minister would be speaking to each other shortly about the handling of the Lower Ormeau Road. He knew that Dr Mowlam must be feeling very low after what had happened, and all the efforts she had made. He wanted her to know that her efforts had had his support, and that she should not give up on what she had been trying to achieve.

Comment

The tone of the conversation was friendly and constructive throughout. In expressing any criticism, Ahern spoke much more in sorrow than in anger. The Prime Minister believes that he has a good point about the damage in referring to terrorist threats as a reason for allowing the march to go ahead - this is a point we made early yesterday, although I appreciate that the Chief Constable's comments cannot be directly controlled. As a matter of interest, do we know whether Trimble was in Drumcree church?

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


JOHN HOLMES

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Northern Ireland Office

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