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From the Private Secretary

9 July 1997

Dear Sir,

## MEETING WITH THE SDLP, 9 JULY

John Hume, Seamus Mallon and Eddie McGrady called on the Prime Minister for 45 minutes this afternoon in the House of Commons. Dr Mowlam, Jonathan Powell, Alastair Campbell and I were also there.

After we had had the benefit of Hume's advice on NATO enlargement, the Prime Minister said that the current situation was obviously depressing. He wanted to make clear privately that assessment and reassessment of the Drumcree decision had been going on right up to the last minute. It had been an appalling decision to have to take. He knew the SDLP were angry about the way it had eventually gone, but if Dr Mowlam had overridden the advice of the RUC Chief Constable and the GOC, her position would have been impossible in the event of serious trouble. He fully understood the point that might should not be seen to be right in these decisions. His own thinking on Drumcree was rather different from what the Chief Constable had said: he believed that there was a right to march, although he very much wished that those concerned had not exercised it on this occasion.

Hume said that Drumcree had been bound to be particularly difficult following what happened in 1995 and 1996. But the reason given by the Chief Constable for his decision was completely irresponsible. It simply encouraged hard men in the IRA in their argument that only force worked. He understood the Prime Minister's point about the right to march. He could organise a march down the Shankhill Road, but that would be totally irresponsible.

Mallon made an obscure reference to the actions of the Governor in Little Rock in the case of the bussing of school children. He went on that he personally had never accepted that there was an absolute right to march. In any case, the

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worst was yet to come this weekend. There would be serious flash points in Derry, Armagh and Newry, as well as in Belfast. The point of Orange Order marches was not to celebrate their heritage but to deliver a humiliating message to local Catholic communities. The only group to benefit from what was happening was the IRA. They thought it was Christmas. The Government had to face up to the problem in a more fundamental way. It was not fair to say that the Government had no choice about what to do. The Secretary of State had powers under Section 5 of the relevant legislation, in addition to the Chief Constable's powers under Section 4. The Government should exercise these powers in the interests of the wider good of the community.

The Prime Minister repeated that, if he had been in Dr Mowlam's place, he would have come to the same decision, hard though it had been. He understood nationalist anger, but a decision the other way would have resulted in an explosion of anger on the other side. McGrady commented that the decisions always seemed to go one way. The Prime Minister said that this was not true. The Unionists certainly believed that his Government had taken a series of political decisions which fundamentally threatened them. Mallon said that what worried him most was the political context of decisions on marches. If the substantive talks succeeded in reaching a reasonable settlement, but some Unionists were unhappy, there might be a threat of violence. If the Chief Constable then told the Government that the position could not be held, what would the Government do?

The Prime Minister said that this would be a completely different situation from a march, where there was a principle that should normally be upheld, namely the right to march. If there was a settlement which had been endorsed in some way, he would hold to it, whatever might happen. He would not under any circumstances be swayed by violence from either side. He agreed with Mallon that the present situation was playing into the hands of Sinn Fein. This was perhaps its most frustrating feature. But that did not make the decisions any easier.

Hume repeated that Orange Order marches through Catholic areas were deliberately provocative. He feared that the planned Orange Order march in Derry on Friday night would end in disaster. The situation on the streets was the worst he had known in 25 years. McGrady added that marches were occasionally banned in mainland Britain because of their effect on local communities.

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The Prime Minister said that this only happened where a particular group was planning an exceptional demonstration ie not taking a route that it had taken for many years, or was setting out deliberately to create disorder. He was not defending the wish of the Orange Order to march as they did. He thought that their actions were unnecessary and in many ways childish. But there was still an underlying principle which was hard to deny.

Mallon said that he could live with most parades, although he did not like them. But marches like Drumcree were designed to rub the noses of Catholics in Protestant triumphalism. These marches were after all celebrations of Protestant victories. He repeated that the only beneficiaries from all this were Sinn Fein and the IRA. They could pose as the defenders of the nationalist communities and, after winding up the situation, respond with violence. There was a very serious risk of IRA action. Sinn Fein would then have the shameless hypocrisy to appeal for calm. That was what he found most difficult to take.

The Prime Minister said that he entirely saw this. His frustration was that progress had appeared to be underway in the wider peace process. Conditions had been much better than in the past. He had deliberately taken away from Sinn Fein all the supposed obstacles to inclusive talks, so that they either had to join, or the talks could reasonably go ahead without them. The present situation risked giving them a way out. But all concerned should keep their eye on the wider process.

Hume launched into one of his history lessons about the failings of the previous Government during the ceasefire, but went on to reinforce the point made by Seamus Mallon, that Unionism had used force in the past to overturn democracy. The so-called nationalist mind set had changed enormously in recent years. Nationalists fully accepted the need to find agreement with the Unionists. But the Unionists were still stuck in a laager mentality. He repeated that he really feared for what might happen in Derry if the Orange Order were allowed to cross the bridge.

Mallon gave an account of the situation in Newry, where he thought on the basis of private conversations that the local Orange Order would agree to re-route their weekend march, but this could not be guaranteed, since it was impossible to say anything about these discussions in public.

Hume said that David Ervine had asked to meet him the previous day, in order to make clear to him that there had been no truth in what the Chief

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Constable had said about loyalist threats of terrorist violence. McGrady added that he hoped the march down the Lower Ormeau Road on Saturday would be re-routed, and that this could be announced early.

Mallon went back to the talks. If the talks timetable agreed the previous day in Belfast could be adhered to, that would create the most important pressure on Sinn Fein. They would find it very difficult to keep out of substantive negotiations once they started. Sinn Fein would be hoping against hope the timetable could not be met, so that the substantive talks would not start in September and they would be let off the hook. He added that one of the things which made events in Drumcree so difficult for him psychologically was the fact that he had spent 14 months in the talks so far to no good purpose. He feared that the talks could never lead anywhere because of the threat of Unionist force if ever a reasonable settlement looked close.

The Prime Minister said that he had been psychologically upset himself by the weekend events, not least the quite unreasonable condemnation of Dr Mowlam. He also worried that reaction in Britain might be to say that both sides in Northern Ireland were hopeless, and to wash our hands of settlement efforts. He did not think this was right, but he needed public support for his efforts. He believed it was possible to reach a settlement through negotiations, or at least reach a position where a reasonable offer could be put to a referendum. If, in either of those circumstances, there was an attempt to overturn what had been agreed through violence, he would certainly not give into this.

Mallon said that he was glad to hear this. His own memories of 1974/75 were very bitter. He returned to the question of marches. It was not just a question of what happened on 12 July every year. There were thousands of marches in Northern Ireland from March onwards. They wound up the tension in Northern Ireland to breaking point in the summer. As had already been said, they were genuinely triumphalist. McGrady added that those who had taken part in the 1995 and 1996 Drumcree marches had been given campaign medals. No doubt the same would happen this year.

Dr Mowlam said that she hoped the implementation of the North Report would help, although it could not be a magic solution to all the problems. They were for example looking at the tricky question of band parades.

The Prime Minister said that it might be difficult for him to understand the full context of marching in Northern Ireland from the outside, but he stuck to the

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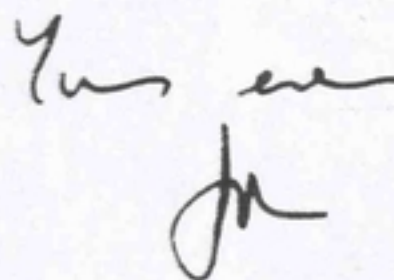
principle he had already outlined. In any case it was necessary to keep trying to make progress on the wider front.

Mallon agreed, but commented that the constitutional parties felt irrelevant in present circumstances. They could not control or even influence much of what happened. Constitutional politicians like him were not much good at street demonstrations, while others of a more extreme turn of mind were past masters at them. He repeated that events this weekend would be crucial - even more so than those of last weekend.

#### Comment

The meeting ended at this point. The tone had been reasonably friendly and constructive throughout, with no recriminations about the leaked minute, although there was obvious dismay at the decision the Government had taken over Drumcree. There was no obvious animosity towards Dr Mowlam, and indeed both Mallon and McGrady made a point of saying goodbye to her on the way out with particular warmth and encouragement. Although the discussion itself was inconclusive, it should have helped to damp down further SDLP anger. The SDLP leaders should also have been reassured by the clear distinction drawn by the Prime Minister between difficult decisions over marches and his absolute determination to resist violence or threats of violence over the substance of negotiations. But the risk of more trouble over this weekend was very much in everyone's mind.

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



JOHN HOLMES

Ken Lindsay Esq  
Northern Ireland Office

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