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From: John Holmes

Date: 11 July 1997

PRIME MINISTER

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Orange Order decisions about the most contentious marches this weekend seem to be holding reasonably well, despite continuing criticism from some of their members and from Ian Paisley. Paisley has been calling for a united Unionist front to oppose this kind of "capitulation". One might have thought that Trimble would find it easy in this situation to take the moral high ground with the Orange Order, and leave Paisley exposed as an extremist.

There was incidentally a further piece of good news when local agreement was reached about handling of another contentious parade in a small town called Newtownbutler.

The noises off from Sinn Fein meanwhile are reasonably encouraging. Adams has been relatively conciliatory in public, while McGuinness was similarly in positive mode in a further telephone conversation this afternoon with Quentin Thomas. He said that he had not yet had a chance to study our letter, but his first impressions were good. But he went on to say that it would still be helpful if we could say more, in particular in public, about our approach to confidence-building measures. Quentin was non-committal.

As you discussed with Ahern, assuming the weekend goes OK, the focus now shifts to getting agreement on decommissioning in the talks by the target date of

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23 July. As I have suggested to you, Trimble has been rather more accommodating in recent days than his initial letter to you, and his meeting with me, might have suggested. But there appears to be a real sticking point for him: if it is absolutely apparent on 15 September that no decommissioning can possibly happen for several months, he simply cannot stay in the talks. After their discussions with the UUP, the NIO believe that this problem may be soluble by providing assurances from both governments about the early establishment of the Independent Commission, and about the availability of actual "schemes" for decommissioning. These ideas will take a lot of selling to the Irish, since they will fear the impact of them on Sinn Fein and their readiness to declare a ceasefire and join the talks. As always, there is a tightrope to be walked here, as you commented to Ahern.

... As background, I attach, flagged up, Trimble's letter to you; a long NIO paper setting out the above in huge detail, including a draft letter to Ahern and draft elements of a possible reply to Trimble; and our draft decommissioning "scheme", so that you can see what this involves. I do not suggest you plough your way through all of this, but you may like to glance.

... Attached immediately below is a much shorter version of the draft letter to Ahern which I have put together. If you agree, this could go first thing on Monday morning, or even on Sunday if the weekend seems to be going well (but I will just need to check the NIO are happy).

There remains the issue of whether you should respond in writing to Trimble's letter. Our initial instinct was to avoid this, since we would only be giving lots of hostages to fortune, if we were not careful. This may still be right. His

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points have been extensively discussed already with the NIO, and will continue to be so, and you could, and indeed should, have another meeting with Trimble yourself in the next week. My only concern has been that, if we obviously continue to avoid replying to Trimble in writing, a comparison may be made between this and our readiness to send a detailed reply to Sinn Fein's requests for clarification, if and when this becomes public. You may like to reflect on the tactics of this.

**JOHN HOLMES****CONFIDENTIAL**