

CONFIDENTIAL



10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA

File
cc JP
PB
PMcFadden
AC

From the Private Secretary

19 May 1997

SUBJECT
MASTER

Filed on:

See Her,

CALL BY LORD ALDERDICE, 19 MAY

John Alderdice called on the Prime Minister for 30 minutes this afternoon. He was alone. Dr. Mowlam and David Hill were present on our side.

Alderdice said that the positive feelings about the new government in Britain had been carried over into Northern Ireland as well. The Prime Minister's speech had been well received, not least for its honesty and the momentum it promised. But the situation on the ground was dangerous and polarised – people's expectations had been raised by the ceasefire, and anger and bitterness were the higher because of the subsequent disappointment. But this anger was matched by a fear of what would happen if Northern Ireland fell back into the abyss. This meant that the dangers were matched by possibilities for progress.

The Prime Minister said that, if the Government talked to Sinn Fein, people presumably thought that this ought to lead to a ceasefire and Sinn Fein's entry into the talks. Alderdice agreed. He thought that the Republican movement had nowhere else to go. But if Sinn Fein did not enter the talks, it was important that the settlement train really did leave without them. They could always catch up at a subsequent station. This would need real drive from the British Government, since virtually all the parties would find reasons for not moving on. It also meant that a timescale for the talks was vital. The legislation already set one, but the intention should be to sew up the political talks by Christmas – the summer should be used to tee up the process to tackle the three strands seriously in the autumn. If the process got stuck (because Trimble was too terrified of Paisley and McCartney, or Hume could not break out of his candy floss language), the two governments would need to take it on themselves. It

CONFIDENTIAL

P

CONFIDENTIAL

- 2 -

was best that this should be done relatively early in the life of the British Government.

Alderdice went on that the new Government's approach to devolution throughout the UK was helpful because it meant that Northern Ireland was no longer in an obviously different position. He was also happy that pressure was being applied to the Irish Government to move on articles 2 and 3 of the constitution.

Discussion moved on to the marching season. The Prime Minister asked whether an IRA ceasefire would make the summer easier. Alderdice thought probably not. The parades issue was not a question of allegiance to tradition, but of marking out and defending territory. The Garvaghy Road had been a battleground for many years. If the Orange Order really were prepared to sit down and talk to the residents, a local accommodation could perhaps be found. But it might also be useful to say to the Orange Order privately that, if they sat down with the residents in a reasonable fashion, but met unreasonableness on the other side, the Government would let a suitably moderate march through. If they were not prepared to sit down and try at all, there would be no march. Another approach would be to treat the Parades Commission's recommendations as binding even before the legislation was through.

Dr. Mowlam said that the latter would just wind up the Unionists unnecessarily. In any case, Alastair Graham was not ready to take on such a role yet. But she was attracted by the idea of saying to march organisers that if there was any triumphalism or distasteful references to previous deaths during marches, there would be no march the following year. She went on to discuss the possible options for dealing with Drumcree. She expected that the RUC Chief Constable would want the Government to take the decision. In any case, she hoped that all those with any authority in Northern Ireland, especially those outside government, would stand up publicly for common sense solutions. The Prime Minister echoed this thought. He was struck by the role which businessmen might be able to play in exerting pressure on the politicians.

Alderdice suggested that the key was for local residents to feel that the Orange Order had some respect for them. Those on the Garvaghy Road did not want a war on their doorsteps, and would be prepared to be reasonable if they felt their rights were being respected. Meanwhile it was unhelpful that John Hume had chosen to go so public about the possibility of the leader of the Orange Order meeting the Garvaghy Road residents.

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

- 3 -

Comment

This was as friendly and rational a meeting as usual with Lord Alderdice. He struck me as less pessimistic than in most recent meetings.

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

Yours etc



JOHN HOLMES

Ken Lindsay, Esq.,
Northern Ireland Office.

CONFIDENTIAL