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10 DOWNING STREET
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From the Private Secretary

19 May 1997

Dear Ken,

CALL BY ROBERT MCCARTNEY MP, 19 MAY

Robert McCartney, accompanied by an adviser whose name I did not catch, called on the Prime Minister for about 40 minutes today. Dr. Mowlam and David Hill were present on our side.

After congratulations, McCartney said that he felt excluded from input into the Government's policy on Northern Ireland. Despite the fact that he had sat on the Labour Party benches and voted with them on every occasion, Trimble had been called to see the Prime Minister first. As far as the Prime Minister's speech was concerned, it had served its purpose in making most Unionists more comfortable, but it did not take actual policy further than the previous government. There were two concepts which did not run together: resolving the conflict between HMG and the IRA, and finding a political settlement. Efforts to find the IRA's bottom line in order to persuade them to stop terrorism had created serious obstacles to a political settlement. The peace process had paradoxically made the two communities hate each other more than ever. Unionists had been made paranoid by the lengths to which the British Government had gone in seeking to stop IRA violence, while Nationalist expectations had been raised too high.

McCartney continued that the consent principle was in fact nonsense. The IRA and Sinn Fein would never buy into it unless they had the glimmer of a promise of Irish unity. Adams' position remained as he had set it out in March 1993: the price of an IRA ceasefire was a declaration by the British Government that partition would be ended. Moreover, the consent principle was a double-edged sword, which Nationalists interpreted as consent to the transfer of sovereignty. That was why they insisted on cross-border bodies with political significance. No-one was against practical cooperation with the South, but why did this need to be encased in political institutions?

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CONFIDENTIAL

- 2 -

The Prime Minister said that he came to the issues without prejudices. He had said that Northern Ireland would be part of the UK for many years to come, at least. He would be very happy with that. He wanted to see a devolved government with a proper role for Nationalists, and sensible North/South cooperation. The latter did not need to undermine Northern Ireland as part of the UK. Most people in Northern Ireland appeared ready to support a settlement on these lines.

McCartney said that most people in Northern Ireland did not have a clue. He was happy with devolution for Northern Ireland, along the same lines as that for Scotland and Wales. But there was no precedent for dealing with a minority problem by giving a foreign government a detailed say in a country's affairs. The Anglo-Irish Agreement had driven a coach and horses through normal principles of settling such issues in Europe.

The Prime Minister asked what McCartney actually wanted. McCartney said he wished to see a settlement agreed between the constitutional parties (although he did not think this was likely), with the two governments making clear that it would be backed even if Sinn Fein did not agree, and that any violence would be severely dealt with. However he had no faith that the Irish Government would ever agree to this, following his meeting with Bruton over a year ago. His other requirement was that Dublin's ability to influence Northern Ireland should not be increased.

The Prime Minister said that one of the reasons why he believed the prospects for progress were now better was that attitudes in the Irish Republic had changed. The Irish were prosperous and focused on Europe, and they did not really want Irish unity if any coercion were involved. McCartney disagreed. The Irish liked Europe because of the money, but no Irish government would agree to amend articles 2 and 3 of the constitution - at least not until they could swap the aspiration for the reality of control, eg as set out in the Framework Document. The latter could never be the basis for a settlement, although the NIO would no doubt go on pushing it.

McCartney went on that events this July could turn Northern Ireland into a quagmire for the new Government. The idea of local negotiation settling disputes over parades was a recipe for disaster. The need for local approval would simply extend trouble to the vast majority of parades which were currently sorted out without difficulty. The basic principle should be simple: if a parade was

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CONFIDENTIAL

- 3 -

inherently peaceful and well marshalled, it should be allowed to proceed without threat from third parties.

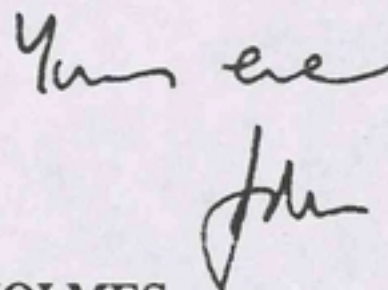
The Prime Minister commented that some parades could be provocative. McCartney was not inclined to agree, and went into the history of Drumcree to demonstrate how Unionists had been gradually cut back in what they could do. He also referred to recent suggestions that Sinn Fein had deliberately stirred up the parades issue. Dr. Mowlam commented that some residents groups might be headed by Sinn Fein activists, but they were nevertheless broadly representative of residents' views. McCartney said that Drumcree was a classic symptom of the problems caused by constant attempts to stop IRA violence. Unionists' confidence had been fatally undermined, and protestations by successive Prime Ministers that they supported the Union were contradicted by their policy in practice.

McCartney finished by complaining about education cutbacks in North Down. The South East Education and Library Board had suffered more than others. Dr. Mowlam pointed out that she had just authorised a further £4 million for education in Northern Ireland. The South East Board had been in particular difficulty because of a large overspend, but it had been agreed that this could be carried for a further two years. McCartney was unpacified.

Comment

... McCartney was his usual provocative and negative self. I enclose some reading material he left for the Prime Minister.

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



JOHN HOLMES

Ken Lindsay, Esq.,
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