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bcc JFH

THE PRIME MINISTER

14 July 1997

Sean Bente

When we spoke on the telephone on Friday, we agreed on the need to ensure that the joint paper on decommissioning would be approved on the planned timetable, to open the way for the substantive talks in September. I explained the difficult position the UUP find themselves in and the need, as we saw it, to find ways to bind them in.

As you know, officials are in touch about what might be said in reply to the questions asked by David Trimble. I am also reflecting on the relative merits of responding in writing or orally. Meanwhile, it has become clear from recent contacts with the UUP that their single most important concern about the joint paper is that it does not provide for any scheme for decommissioning to be in place on 15 September, so that actual decommissioning will not even be theoretically possible then or for some time. Without this the UUP do not believe they can defend themselves from the inevitable criticism from others that they are sitting down with Sinn Fein when it is already clear that there will be no decommissioning during the talks. I therefore believe we need to consider whether we can find some way of meeting this concern, without making any shift of substance on our joint proposals themselves.

- 2 -

It seems to me that the UUP may be satisfied if we can make clear that the Independent Commission will be in place rapidly, and also ensure that a scheme or schemes for actual decommissioning are worked up and available to the Independent Commission for consideration when it begins work on 15 September, even if they could not at that stage have legal force. The point is not that arms would have to be given up at the start of the process (which is not our position) but that the possibility of early decommissioning would clearly exist.

To balance this, we might also agree that there should be active preparation for the substantive talks during the summer, so that the substantive talks could get down to real business straightaway on 15 September. For example, the two governments (and others) could work up discussion papers ready to table on 15 September. Preparatory work for decommissioning would therefore fall naturally into an overall programme of preparation.

I would be grateful if you could look at these ideas very quickly, so that we can sort out our position together in good time before Wednesday's plenary, and the bilateral which I hope Ray Burke will be able to have with David Trimble and his team that morning. Of course we would need to be very careful to avoid giving the impression of presenting David Trimble with a *fait accompli*. In any case, I hope officials can get together very quickly to discuss details. By way of illustration I attach a first draft of the sort of thing we might both say if you were able to agree with our ideas.

As we discussed, I believe there is now a real chance for progress, if we can work on all sides to make the necessary moves. In particular I want Sinn

- 3 -

Fein to move decisively towards a ceasefire, and the UUP to be in a position to accept our joint proposals on decommissioning. These are the key next steps.

Yours sincerely
Tony

Mr Bertie Ahern TD