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From the Private Secretary

17 July 1997

Dear Sam,

## MEETING WITH THE UUP, 17 JULY

1. David Trimble, Ken Maginnis and Jeffrey Donaldson called on the Prime Minister for just over an hour this afternoon. Dr. Mowlam, Paul Murphy, Jonathan Powell and I were there on our side.

2. Trimble said that the situation was very difficult. The letter to Sinn Fein of 9 July which they had just seen was quite appalling. It guaranteed to Sinn Fein that there would not have to be any decommissioning. It was there in black and white at the top of page 3, where it said that the only grounds for expelling a party from the talks were repudiation of the Mitchell principles. The Mitchell principles did not mention decommissioning. Moreover, in the paper of the two Governments, there was no commitment to actual decommissioning at all. This was absolutely plain. All in all, the consent principle had effectively been abandoned, and was clearly intended to be seen as such by the Provisionals. But the crucial point was that due progress on decommissioning must mean actual decommissioning during the talks.

3. Maginnis reinforced this. He quoted further from the 9 July letter, in particular the passage about the two Governments continuing to work for a settlement even if the present talks broke down. This was tantamount to making clear that the two Governments would impose the Joint Framework Document. The letter was also littered with references to good faith. The UUP had met no good faith from the Government over the last 24 hours.

4. The Prime Minister said that his reading of the documents was different. They were firmly based on Mitchell, and the natural interpretation of Mitchell was that there should be actual decommissioning during the talks. Trimble said that paragraph 34 of Mitchell only referred to consideration of parallel

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decommissioning. The Provisionals would no doubt be ready to consider schemes and even adopt schemes, but would not contemplate any actual decommissioning. The UUP had pleaded in vain with the NIO and the Irish to include a reference to actual decommissioning in the document. The Prime Minister had said it himself, but this was simply not good enough, particularly when we had now made clear that Sinn Fein would not be thrown out of the talks if there was no decommissioning. There might be one way out of this situation, which was to link decommissioning to the Mitchell principle on disarmament of paramilitaries by somehow making the latter time-specific. This would give at least some cover.

5. Maginnis went on to quote from the letter sent by Adams to the Prime Minister, to the effect that the two Governments were working to ensure that decommissioning would not be an obstacle in the negotiations. This revealed what was really happening. The Prime Minister said that he did not regard this as significant. We were trying to find a way to move the discussions on from decommissioning. He understood the points the UUP were making. But there was a series of steps to ensure decommissioning happened in the documents: the Independent Commission would be set up and would be able to consider actual schemes before 15 September; there would be a sub-committee of the talks but it would have no veto over the process; the parties would be able to review progress across the talks; and the Independent Chairmen could also take a view. Moreover, on 15 September, all the mechanisms would be ready for decommissioning to proceed.

6. Trimble said that even the review by the parties had now been lost, or at least watered down so far by Paul Murphy's clarifications the previous day as to be worthless. The truth was that there were no sanctions in the process if Sinn Fein refused to decommission.

7. The Prime Minister said that there were three sanctions available: through the Independent Chairmen, the Independent Commission, and the review by the parties. If Sinn Fein were not engaging on decommissioning in good faith, they could be pulled up. They would of course have had to accept the paper of the two Governments like everyone else.

8. Trimble said that there was still no actual commitment to decommissioning. Unless that was there, the UUP could not run with our paper. The Prime Minister said that it was not possible to renegotiate the proposals with the Irish Government but it was quite clear what they meant as far as we were

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concerned. He read from the "possible conclusions" to illustrate this. The document clearly created a right to intervene if there was no progress on decommissioning. There would be sanctions if Sinn Fein was simply filibustering.

9. Donaldson said that we should look at the realities, not the language. If there was an IRA ceasefire, and the talks began, and decommissioning was desirable but not an absolute requirement, the talks could easily go on until Christmas without any real progress on decommissioning. The UUP would be at the table, while the other two Unionist Parties were not. INLA, informally sanctioned by the IRA, would be engaged in violence. The UUP position would be quite untenable in those circumstances. The Unionist people wanted to see actual decommissioning at the beginning of the process. Sinn Fein would simply say that they were not the IRA, but were still prepared to talk about it. That would make it impossible for the UUP to stay in. He emphasised that the UUP were looking for safeguards to stay in, not reasons to stay out.

10. Maginnis said that the UUP had no power except through their presence or absence from the talks. Their position had been undermined by the real negotiations which had been going on with Sinn Fein behind the scenes. The UUP could not be in the talks with 10,000 Unionists protesting outside.

11. Trimble said that the 9 July letter to Sinn Fein made absolutely clear that the proposed review would be no good, because it made clear it was not designed to lead to a blockage. Instead, the Independent Chairmen would be called upon to make a judgement. The Prime Minister said that the letter made clear, reasonably enough, that the purpose of the review was not a blockage. But it was also clear that if parties were not satisfied about progress, the talks would not carry on as if nothing had happened. Trimble said that the purpose of the review was precisely to be able to block the negotiations. Sinn Fein would not decommission voluntarily. They had to be compelled to do it. He found particularly galling that the clarifications given on 16 July had actually implemented the promises made to Sinn Fein in the 9 July letter. He had no doubt about this.

12. The Prime Minister said that there had been no intention to do any such thing. I added that there would be real pressure on Sinn Fein if there was a review and no progress had been made on decommissioning. The focus would be on Sinn Fein's failures, not the position of the UUP.

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13. Trimble said that this did not amount to real pressure. Sinn Fein knew that the UUP would be forced out in such circumstances. If the UUP could be sure that there would be a decommissioning scheme available on 15 September, and if there was a commitment to actual decommissioning in the talks documents, the UUP could stay in the talks, although even this could cause them political losses. Without these changes, it would be impossible for them to vote for the two Governments' paper on Wednesday. Donaldson repeated that the letter to Sinn Fein of 9 July let Sinn Fein off the hook by making clear that if the talks failed, the two Governments would move to a different process, no doubt based on the Joint Framework Document.

14. The Prime Minister said his view was that, once the talks began, the key would lie with the UUP and the SDLP getting together to agree a way forward. Trimble said that the real Hume/Adams strategy was to achieve talks without the Unionists there at all. The Prime Minister said that there was no realistic chance of this being agreed. Maginnis said that the Government was being absorbed in to pan-Nationalist strategy, as the previous Government had been. It was the Unionists who were conceding all the way, as they had been doing for the last six years. Meanwhile the Provisionals had not given up an iota of ground. The letter to Sinn Fein of 9 July virtually named the prisoners we would release, as well as giving in on the Irish language, etc. It was an invitation to Sinn Fein to join the talks, because they could not be thrown out again afterwards.

15. The Prime Minister said that the Nationalists were going to be giving up quite a lot. At the end of the talks, the Union would remain, albeit with some North/South arrangements. A devolved Assembly with North/South co-operation would bind Northern Ireland into the Union. There was no question of accepting anything which weakened the Union. Maginnis said that the Union left at the end of this process would be so eroded as to be unrecognisable. The Joint Framework Document was the blueprint, and this was completely unacceptable because it was a one-way escalator. The UUP had made this absolutely clear in the past, to no avail.

16. The Prime Minister said that the Joint Framework Document could not be repudiated, but it was not written in blood. It was up for negotiation once real negotiations started. That was what we were trying to achieve.

17. Maginnis said that the Government had effectively accepted that they would be negotiating with the IRA. Trimble added that these negotiations were already going on. Moreover, the Government had made clear that, within a

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matter of minutes of a ceasefire, the Government would be in talks with the IRA. They would also encourage the Independent Chairmen to do the same. The six-week period only applied to the invitation to the talks themselves. The IRA could kill someone at 10 o'clock, declare a ceasefire at 11 o'clock, and be in talks with the British Government at 12 o'clock. That was what the aide-memoire made crystal clear.

18. The Prime Minister brought the discussion back to how to resolve the present difficulty. He repeated that he could not renegotiate the joint document with the Irish. Trimble repeated that he could not agree the document as it stood. There had to be a very clear commitment to actual decommissioning during the talks and a proper scheme for decommissioning in place on 15 September. The UUP would table amendments to that effect on Wednesday. If the Government voted against them, that would collapse the talks. The Prime Minister should not have bound himself into an agreement with the Irish before discussing it with the UUP. That was a mistake British Governments had made constantly.

19. Maginnis launched in again. Sinn Fein/IRA had no intention of pursuing anything but their traditional terrorist agenda. Everyone knew that. The rest was play-acting in response to international pressure. The UUP had no intention of giving them the ace card of being able to enter talks, and force the UUP out of them. Trimble said that he entirely agreed. A policy based on getting the Provisionals into the process was absolute folly. He had hoped that the present Government was pursuing a different policy, based on giving the Provisionals a last chance, and then getting him and Hume together, but we were now back to the business of getting Sinn Fein into the talks at any price. This had always been the policy of the people at Stormont Castle. They were second-rate and always had rings run round them by the Irish.

20. The Prime Minister said that he believed it was better to have Sinn Fein in the talks if possible. He accepted to a certain extent that there was a game being played. But the truth was that, once the talks started, any possible solution would fall so far short of what Sinn Fein wanted that they could revert to violence. But at least at that point it would be clear to everyone that they had had their chance. All the pillars of respectable support for them would have been knocked away. Alternately, if Sinn Fein did not come into the talks, we would still be in a position to say that they had had every chance, while Hume and others would be prepared to build from the centre. It was our role to be accused by all sides of dishonesty. The truth was that we were doing our best to take things forward on a reasonable basis. Before Drumcree, we had got to a position where Sinn Fein

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were isolated. Drumcree had allowed them to re-build that position, although he knew there had been no choice about this. But we had to re-build our position again. We had to be seen to have tried everything.

21. Trimble commented that Sinn Fein would be coming in on their own terms. The conditions about commitment to peaceful means had been watered down to virtual extinction. Maginnis added that the Government's position was, without wishing to be rude, based on wishful thinking. The PR battle with Sinn Fein could not be won. The only battle to win was the security battle. Sinn Fein had been forced into a ceasefire in 1994 by the losses they had suffered at the hands of the security forces. The only way to deal with terrorism was to strangle it. The Prime Minister said there might be something in this. Clearly this element could not be ignored. The question was nevertheless how a settlement could be arrived at without getting the reasonable people around a negotiating table.

22. Maginnis said that he had seen the details of our letter to Sinn Fein some days earlier, as had many other people. He suggested that the Government should now spell out very clearly, without mentioning the word decommissioning, their commitment to disarmament of all paramilitaries and the need for proper verification of this. The IRA would scream blue murder, but would not pull out of the process.

23. Trimble said that there was a problem over the next five days. The UUP could not accept the paper in its present form. They would not walk out of the talks, but would abstain in any vote or vote against it. If it was amended to reflect the British understanding of decommissioning, that would help enormously. But British repetition of their interpretation of it was not enough. The only thing that mattered was the document itself, i.e. statements by both governments inside the talks process.

24. The Prime Minister repeated that he could not renegotiate the document with the Irish Government. He might be able to go back to them and say that this was his understanding of it, and ask if they would agree to that. He was not saying he would do that, but he would reflect on this. Maginnis commented that, if the Prime Minister went back to the Irish but got nowhere, this would demonstrate that the Irish Government did not share the British view. It would show them up once and for all as dishonest.

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25. The Prime Minister said, in his view, the Irish did believe that decommissioning should happen during the negotiations, but they were loathe to say so in so many words, not least because of what they feared might happen to the prospects of a ceasefire.

26. Trimble added that the UUP also wanted the Government to claw back the reference in the 9 July letter to not throwing out Sinn Fein from the talks on the basis of decommissioning.

27. Dr. Mowlam said that if the UUP did not agree to the decommissioning document, the talks would be over and the peace process effectively finished. Trimble said that this was not necessarily so. The Governments had to find a document to which all could agree. There was another alternative, which was to proceed with the talks without Sinn Fein, and pigeon-hole decommissioning. He had already proposed this. He repeated that due progress on decommissioning must mean actual decommissioning. If it did not, in the Irish view, then we all had a real problem.

28. The Prime Minister said that he wanted to reflect further on what the UUP had said. He suggested another meeting early next week. Trimble said that the UUP would be available at any time. He advised that we should not try and stitch something up with the Irish and then talk to the UUP, but consult the UUP as we went along.

29. There was a short concluding discussion on the press line. Trimble said that he would make clear that he had made his concerns known to the Prime Minister, that the clarification the UUP had been given before was not sufficient, and that he would be meeting the Prime Minister again. He would not go into detail, and would not mention at this stage the letter to 9 July to Sinn Fein. I attach an account of what Trimble said afterward which is not totally incompatible with this, but does go into a good deal of detail.

30. **Comment:** This was a tough meeting, as expected. The UUP showed occasional flashes of anger, particularly Maginnis, but the atmosphere on the whole nevertheless stayed reasonable. Their bottom line came out very clearly, whatever they might have said before. It did not sound as if they were bluffing overall, although they might still settle for less. We now need to reflect urgently on how to take things forward, not least with the Irish. We will aim for a further

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PREM 49/112 Letter dated 17 July 1992

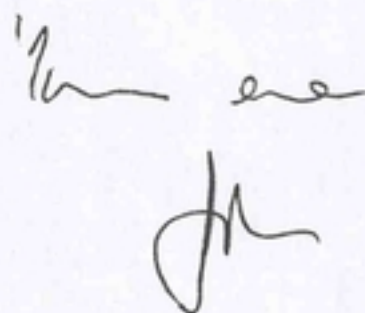


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meeting with Trimble on Monday, but there may well have to be contact before then. I would be grateful for advice as soon as possible.

I am copying this letter to William Ehrman (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), Jan Polley (Cabinet Office), Sir John Kerr (Washington) and Veronica Sutherland (Dublin) - the last two by fax.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to be 'John Holmes', written in a cursive style.

JOHN HOLMES

John McKervill, Esq.,  
Northern Ireland Office.

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