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SUBJECT
MASTER

Filed on:

From the Private Secretary

24 June 1997

Dear Gen,

MEETING WITH THE UPP: 24 JUNE

David Trimble, John Taylor and Ken Maginnis called on the Prime Minister for just over an hour this morning. Dr Mowlam, Jonathan Powell, Alastair Campbell and I were there on our side.

The Prime Minister said that we were at a decisive moment. In his Statement the following day, he proposed to say that we now intended to get substantive negotiations under way, on the basis of the two key elements of a devolved assembly and north/south arrangements. He would explain what had happened with Sinn Fein, but say that, as there was no sign of movement from Sinn Fein, the time had now come to move on in any event. The strategy was to build as much support as possible for moving on without Sinn Fein from the Irish and US Governments, and from the SDLP. US opinion was currently running very strongly in our favour, but on precedent this would fade. This was therefore a window of opportunity. He still believed it would be better to have Sinn Fein in the talks than out, but they seemed to be stringing us along, and we could do no more for them.

Trimble raised the question of decommissioning. Dr Mowlam explained that we had reached agreement with the Irish on proposals which we would table in the talks process. Trimble said that, as he had long warned, a paper on the lines proposed would lead to the collapse of the talks process. Agreeing with the Irish Government was not the right way to proceed. UUP views had not been taken account of. There had been no real consultation.

Dr Mowlam said that we were well aware of UUP views, and had made changes to the paper to accommodate them. Trimble said that any changes were minimal, and NIO officials had lied to them about the contents of the paper. A structure was being created whereby no progress would be made on

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decommissioning for three, or perhaps six months after the start of the negotiations. The Independent Commission would only be formed when the negotiations started. It then had lots to do, which was bound to take a good deal of time. Moreover, the Irish would delay the process, as they always did.

Maginnis said that he had pressed for the Commission to be set up at an early stage for months. The Irish had resisted this. Meanwhile, there was no evidence that the names of members of the Commission had even been seriously looked at.

Trimble said that Mitchell's proposals meant parallel decommissioning. But there were serious difficulties in the interpretation of parallel decommissioning between us and the Irish. The Irish said that Mitchell meant no decommissioning until the end of the talks.

Dr Mowlam said that she hoped to table the paper in the talks this afternoon. She knew the UUP would not agree to it immediately, but she hoped that the parties would give it one or two weeks' careful consideration. Trimble said that the timing of tabling the paper was all wrong, especially just before the parades. The Prime Minister said that he was acting in good faith. There were two alternatives: either inclusive talks or building from the centre on the basis of UUP/SDLP agreement. He saw no other choice. We could not go down the second route unless all the constituent elements - the Irish, Americans and the SDLP - were bound in and we were seen to have made every effort to make inclusive talks possible.

Trimble said that it looked as if we were trying to remove all the difficulties for Sinn Fein. After 13 June, the only difficulty left had been decommissioning. The present paper would be seen by Sinn Fein as guaranteeing that there would be no decommissioning. There was no guarantee in the paper that Sinn Fein had to do anything. This was a trap waiting for the UUP. The UUP would study the paper, but they had not liked what they had seen before. The Prime Minister said that he did not recognise Trimble's description of the paper. Our interpretation was that it meant parallel decommissioning had to happen in one form or another. And there was an emergency brake for the parties to pull if there was no progress.

Maginnis said that in reality, it would be very difficult to throw Sinn Fein out of the talks even if they were not behaving properly. There would be huge pressure not to do this. The Prime Minister accepted that there was a problem here, but repeated that, if we were to move on without Sinn Fein we had to have everyone else lined up properly. Maginnis said that we had given Sinn Fein a paper on 13 June. We had got our answer at Lurgan three days later. But we were

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still asking the same question. The Prime Minister said that he could not say that Sinn Fein could not ever come into the talks, whatever they did or said in the future. But he could say that the talks would move on without them. It was then up to Sinn Fein to decide what they should do. He suspected Sinn Fein had a serious problem with the approach on the Union he had set out in his speech. They could nevertheless decide to go for a tactical ceasefire to come into the talks. He accepted that thereafter it would always be difficult to throw Sinn Fein out of the talks. But he was prepared to give an assurance that, if there was no decommissioning progress, this was what would have to happen.

I commented that the UUP assumption that the Irish liked the paper was not necessarily the case; they had resisted agreement to it for a long time. And Sinn Fein might well see it as a decommissioning trap. It was surely better to get the other parties signed up in one way or another to parallel decommissioning, not least because Sinn Fein would then not be able to change the terms of the agreement if they ever joined the talks.

Trimble said that the two month review period was unsatisfactory. He had always argued for an immediate check on decommissioning. The UUP could not sit in the talks with Sinn Fein for two months without some progress on decommissioning. He repeated that the paper of the two Governments would force the UUP out of the talks. He suspected that all the difficult points were being watered down to bring Sinn Fein in. That was certainly how people would see it in Northern Ireland. It was appeasement.

The Prime Minister said that our interpretation of the paper was clear. There would have to be some decommissioning in the course of the talks. We needed agreement on decommissioning to get the talks moving, and we needed to have made this step, to have any chance of getting the SDLP to work with the UUP. A solution involving a devolved assembly and north/south arrangements would effectively exclude a united Ireland. That was what we were trying to achieve.

Maginnis went through his difficulties over the sub-committee on confidence-building measures. This would be bunged up with all sorts of proposals, and would be used to block progress on decommissioning.

Trimble said that there were three key elements for the UUP. There had to be a firm commitment to actual decommissioning happening alongside the talks, and agreement on sanctions if this did not happen. Second, the machinery should be in place as soon as possible so that the Irish and the SDLP could not

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throw a further spanner in the works. Third, dealing with confidence-building measures should be made clearly separate from decommissioning, so that there could be no question of trading guns for concessions in areas like prisoners and policing.

Dr Mowlam said she saw no difficulties in our spelling out our position on the first two of these. On the third, we could not change the paper, but we could make clear publicly that in our interpretation there was no link of the kind Trimble had suggested. Trimble said that there should be two separate committees, not two sub-committees. The proposed structure was soft on Sinn Fein, and effectively what Spring had proposed right at the beginning.

Taylor said that, although he had not seen the details of the paper, we were moving close to a crisis. If the paper was tabled at Stormont, it would be immediately denounced by Paisley and McCartney. He asked whether the UUP could not at least see the paper now on a Privy Council basis. (This was agreed, and they were given copies as they left.)

Trimble went back to the need for very quick moves from Sinn Fein to build confidence if they came into the talks. Otherwise the UUP could not survive in the same room. The paper did not bite in the sense of assuring decommissioning. The Prime Minister said that the UUP could always block progress if there was no decommissioning. Trimble said he did not want to be put in that position. Why should he be forced to bring the process to a halt? It was Sinn Fein who were not acting in good faith. The feeling in Northern Ireland was that the Lurgan murders had pushed the government into further concessions.

The Prime Minister said that this was incorrect. Moreover Sinn Fein had lost support as a result of what had happened. His own view of Sinn Fein (never particularly favourable) had been deeply coloured by what had happened. He did not know whether there was any hope of them being reasonable and being brought in on that basis. But as long as they could claim in any way at all, however unjustified, that they were being kept out, it was very difficult to move on without them. He was prepared to look at what he could say in his Statement the following day on the three points Trimble had raised. If Sinn Fein did come in, they would probably never agree to whatever emerged from the talks, but a return to violence at that stage would have no support whatever.

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Trimble said that Hume would never willingly cut his links with Adams and McGuinness. He had been involved with them for too long. He always said just one more step was needed to bring about peace for ever. The Prime Minister acknowledged the difficulty, but said that there might be more chance with the SDLP as a whole. In any case, he would put this point to Hume strongly when he saw him later. There would be a lot of pressure on Hume to move on if Sinn Fein did not behave.

Dr Mowlam said that she was committed to tabling the paper in the talks, although she knew the UUP did not want this. How could we be helpful in these circumstances? Trimble said that comments by the Prime Minister on the lines discussed would be helpful. But the paper itself would also have to be changed, or the UUP would be hung out to try.

Taylor said that, if the paper was tabled today, it would dominate the news and others could put an unhelpful spin on it. It would be much better if it came out after, or in parallel with, the Prime Minister's Statement. After some discussion, this was agreed.

The Prime Minister added that he would speak to Bruton to explain what he proposed to say in his Statement, particularly about the need for actual decommissioning. He would urge Bruton to say the same thing. If Bruton's interpretation of Mitchell was different, he accepted there would be a real problem.

Maginnis referred to possible changes in the Loyalist parties, sidelining Irvine and McMichael. He did not want to be alarmist but Taylor asked what would happen at today's session of talks? He hoped they could be adjourned until early next week, rather than to the following day, to give time for the paper to be considered. Dr Mowlam said this was her expectation too.

The meeting concluded at this point. Trimble said that, in talking to the press, he would confine himself to generalities. He would say that the paper would be based on the Mitchell report, with which he had always been comfortable. His concern was to make sure that the report was implemented in practice. These lines were agreed.

Comment

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The meeting could have been worse. The tone remained calm and for the most part friendly. Trimble's threats to collapse the talks process if the paper was not changed did not seem to carry entire conviction. I have not recorded all Maginnis's interventions, most of which were confused and detailed.

The Prime Minister judged it right to agree to the delay in releasing the paper, since that might help to tie in the UUP. We will also need to look carefully at what to say in the Statement on the three points raised by Trimble. Trimble seems to have been as good as his word in his public comments afterwards, to the extent that he is seen as having endorsed the decommissioning paper. I hope he will not feel the need to go too far the other way in order to correct this impression.

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

*Yours
John*

JOHN HOLMES

Ken Lindsay Esq
Northern Ireland Office

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