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10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA

Feb 14
SUBJECT
MASTER

Filed on:

From the Private Secretary

27 June 1997

Dear Ken,

TELEPHONE CALL TO THE TAOISEACH

The Prime Minister spoke to the new Taoiseach for fifteen minutes this afternoon.

The Prime Minister started by congratulating the Taoiseach on taking office. The Taoiseach thanked him for his message. The Prime Minister said they should keep in close touch. He hoped they could meet as soon as possible. Northern Ireland was uppermost in his mind, but he also wanted to keep in touch on other issues such as Europe. The Taoiseach welcomed this. He said that decommissioning was the immediate issue, followed by the peace talks, the continuing violence and Drumcree. He had seen the paper on decommissioning and thought it was a good one. He had also talked to Senator Mitchell. The Prime Minister said that we needed to keep the Unionists on board. He had done everything he could to get Sinn Fein on board too. The Taoiseach said that they would use all the influence they had with Sinn Fein. His recent efforts had been constrained by the Lurgan murders.

The Taoiseach asked if it was true Sinn Fein had been in touch to seek clarification on a number of issues. The Prime Minister said that they had asked about confidence-building measures, transfer of prisoners and such like. He was open to genuine requests for clarification. But he was worried they had first asked for clarification on the timetable, then on decommissioning, then on other issues. He was beginning to wonder whether he was being strung along, although he would not make a big issue out of this.

The Prime Minister continued that he was at the limit of what was acceptable to public opinion. He was worried that elements within Sinn Fein and the IRA did not want to get into the talks, and that the recent violence was

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designed to stop progress. The Taoiseach said that he also wondered whether Sinn Fein were raising other issues to drag out the process. Nevertheless, they could just be trying to expand the agenda. He hoped this was the case. The Prime Minister said that he was slightly worried about getting into this. That said, if Sinn Fein were seeking genuine clarification, he was not going to stand on ceremony.

The Prime Minister continued that he was grateful for Irish support on the issue of decommissioning, and for saying that they supported Mitchell ie some decommissioning during negotiations, but not all and none before. He hoped this position was firm. The Taoiseach claimed that Mitchell said decommissioning "should happen" rather than that it would definitely have to. His view was that we should be pragmatic: the issue would be easier once negotiations started. He had spoken to Mitchell, who still thought there would be some decommissioning at some stage. The Prime Minister said this was right. There would be a problem if Sinn Fein asked us to make explicit that there would be no decommissioning during negotiations, or to make clear how much there should be. Once they were in the talks, all these issues would be much easier. The Taoiseach agreed. Getting Sinn Fein in was the problem. The Prime Minister said that we were going to have to continue saying that there would be some decommissioning during negotiations. It would be impossible to alter that. Otherwise, we would lose the Unionists.

The Taoiseach asked if we were sticking by Mitchell. The Prime Minister said yes. Decommissioning was an issue the Government had inherited. Nevertheless, they had to stand by Mitchell. If the Government said there would be no decommissioning until after negotiations, we would lose the Unionists completely. The Prime Minister repeated that if the talks started, the substance would become easier.

The Taoiseach said that he welcomed Dr Mowlam's initiative on Drumcree. It was worth the effort. Local dialogue was the best way forward, although he did not know whether it would be successful. He had sent a supportive letter to the residents. He had also offered to meet them, if that would be helpful. The Prime Minister said that it would. Speaking frankly, he thought the best thing would be quick agreement on some limited form of march at the least provocative time of day.

The Prime Minister continued that the perception here was that he had bent over backwards to get Sinn Fein into the talks. Opinion was delicately poised.

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He had brought the Conservative opposition along so far, and the press were more or less on-side. There was, however, little more he could do. The Taoiseach replied that the Prime Minister had already moved the agenda a long way. With the exception of the issues already mentioned, he did not believe there was a lot more the Prime Minister could do except to listen and wait.

The Prime Minister said that it would be disastrous if there was another atrocity. He confided in the Taoiseach that he had asked Bill Clinton and John Bruton a couple of weeks ago to send a strong message that there should be no more violence. This appeared to have had little effect. Nevertheless, he hoped the Taoiseach would deliver a similar message. The Taoiseach said he had done so earlier in the week.

Returning to Drumcree, the Taoiseach said that whatever happened he doubted there would be a repeat of last year. Business and the local community did not want this. Nevertheless, there still needed to be a little bit of movement. He hoped the proximity talks would provide this.

The Taoiseach asked when he and the Prime Minister might meet. The Prime Minister suggested that the Taoiseach visit London for talks on Thursday, 3 July.

The Prime Minister repeated that he wanted to work closely with the Taoiseach. The Taoiseach said that he wanted inclusive talks including Sinn Fein. Otherwise, he would be prepared to think again. The Prime Minister said that if Sinn Fein were not prepared to join the talks, we would need to look at the alternatives.

The Taoiseach said that he was anxious to avoid the problems we had had under the last Government over press lines following meetings and telephone calls. He would get Joe Lennon (?), his new press spokesman, to get in touch with Alastair Campbell. The Prime Minister suggested that we do no more than confirm that the call had taken place. The Taoiseach agreed.

Comment

We agreed with the Taoiseach's office afterwards that he should see the Prime Minister in London from 1500 to 1630 on 3 July, and that they can make this public.

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The Prime Minister remains worried about the Irish position on decommissioning and in particular the Taoiseach's suggestion that Mitchell was less than definite about some decommissioning during the negotiations. This is, of course, not a new problem, but he would like your Secretary of State to speak to Mitchell and to try to pin him down as far as possible to our interpretation of his recommendation ie that there will need to be some decommissioning during negotiations.

I am copying this letter to Dominick Chilcott (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), Jan Polley (Cabinet Office) and Veronica Sutherland in Dublin (by fax).

Yours ever,

Philip

PHILIP BARTON

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Northern Ireland Office

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