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SUBJECT
MASTER

Filed on:

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From the Private Secretary

3 July 1997

Dear Ken,

MEETING WITH THE TAOISEACH, 3 JULY

The Prime Minister and Ahern began with a tête-à-tête, with Paddy Teahon and I present as note-takers. In the event, this lasted for 50 minutes. I have recorded the remaining plenary separately.

The Prime Minister said that Northern Ireland was taking a lot of his time and energy. He would explain his position frankly. He wanted to move the process on, with Sinn Fein in if possible. He was prepared to do anything reasonable to get Sinn Fein in, but would not be pushed into doing what was not reasonable. We had done what we had been told was needed on a timescale for their entry. We had also reached agreement on decommissioning. His impression was that a struggle was going on inside the republican movement, and meanwhile we were being strung along by Sinn Fein. This wasn't a huge problem, as long as we were reasonably confident that there would be the right outcome. But if in reality this process was going nowhere, we could not accept that. We were prepared to offer further reasonable clarification to Sinn Fein, but what they were asking for now went well beyond what they seemed to be asking for in the past.

The Prime Minister went on that he came to the issues with no ideological or historical baggage. He regarded the present situation as irrational and stupid, and simply wanted to stop people killing each other. There was agreement amongst most rational people, including in the Irish Republic, on the centrality of the consent principle. He saw two main elements in a settlement: a fair devolved assembly and North/South arrangements. If there was a desire for future constitutional change beyond that, that was for discussion later. He repeated that he had done everything he could to bring Sinn Fein in, but if they were not prepared to come in, the process could not stand still. He thought Trimble was trying to stay engaged. Hume was very tied to the Sinn Fein

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option, but even he might reach a point where he gave up on them. Meanwhile he did not want anyone to drive wedges between the two Governments. He would continue to try to get Sinn Fein in, but not at any price. This was not because of Unionist pressure, but because he did not believe it would be right to go further on some fundamental principles.

Ahern said that he was very grateful for the time and attention the Prime Minister was giving to the issue. He was very anxious to improve relations in general. He too came to Northern Ireland with no historical baggage. He too wanted to look to the future. His Government was happy to sign up to the position as it now stood. He had been making that clear to all concerned, including the SDLP. He had also made very clear to the republican movement privately, both directly and indirectly, that they now had a great opportunity. They must take it and take it quickly. Dialogue would achieve far more than continuing violence. If they did not take it they would only alienate themselves from the two Governments. He believed that the republicans had understood this message. There would always be a hard core in the movement, but he believed that the peace camp were in the majority.

Ahern went on that the republicans did not of course operate through orderly meetings, but through a process of signing up individuals to a particular policy. He thought there was now a willingness to begin that process. He knew that we regarded Adams's letter to the Prime Minister as an impossible shopping list, containing the kitchen sink. He thought the latest letter to Quentin Thomas was more meaningful. But if we answered it point by point, this might give a negative impression. We should look at bringing out the positive points as far as we could, building on the aide memoire. There were two key issues:

- i Prisoners. The two main areas of concern were transfers from Britain, and the very high security classification of many IRA prisoners. Some of these people were from small, tight-knit communities, and the fact that they did not see their families for years at a time, even after serving 20 years, had a very negative effect. He was arguing to Sinn Fein that these issues would be easier to deal with after a ceasefire. But there was no doubt of their importance.
- ii Decommissioning. The concern here was not so much how the Unionists would react to the two Governments' joint paper, but their ability to press a stop button if Sinn Fein were in the talks. Sinn Fein knew this was not an easy issue, but wanted to know what the British

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Government's position was. If they were in the talks and acting in good faith, trying to move along the process, but the Unionists tried to press the stop button, would the whole thing then stop? Would they be forced to decommission some weapons or be thrown out? If the answer to this question was yes, there would be major difficulties. If we could take a more constructive approach, and suggest that these issues would need to be addressed in the talks, recognising that decommissioning would in the end be voluntary, this would obviously help.

Ahern concluded that, if we could give Sinn Fein as constructive a reply as possible, including on these two key issues, and assuming other events did not derail the process entirely, he believed the republican movement would move to a ceasefire, and do so very quickly.

The Prime Minister said that the issue of prisoners might not be too difficult to deal with, although it would of course be much easier once there was a ceasefire in place. On decommissioning, if we tried to be too definitive, this might not prove helpful. If Sinn Fein came into the process, making clear that there could be no decommissioning until the end of negotiations, that would be a breach of our interpretation of the Mitchell report. We were ready to tell the Unionists that decommissioning had to be during negotiations and that how this was done had to be discussed in the negotiations. But we could not live with a situation where it was clear there would be no decommissioning. He did not understand the review process as giving Unionists a unilateral right to pull the plug on negotiations. But there would have to be a look at whether all participants were participating in the faith.

Ahern said that the Irish position was in favour of total disarmament of all paramilitaries. They would be happy to see it all done before negotiations started. But if the republican movement was required to commit itself to decommissioning before negotiations or during them, their answer would be no. If on the other hand there was a ceasefire, and the negotiations were moving forward, he saw no reason why they should not think about decommissioning in good faith. They would of course have signed up to the Mitchell principles when coming into the talks. Sinn Fein's fear was that the Unionists would try to get them thrown out, even if they were acting in good faith. Of course, if Sinn Fein were not acting in good faith in the talks, that would be a different situation, and they would not deserve support.

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The Prime Minister agreed that this issue only arose if Sinn Fein were not acting in good faith. But good faith in our view meant being ready to agree to some decommissioning during the negotiations. We could not back away from this interpretation of Mitchell.

Ahern said that it was really a question of wording on decommissioning. He did not see any great difficulties with the rest of the Sinn Fein letter, which we could deal with on the basis of the aide memoire, on which he congratulated us. He repeated that, if we gave a good reply, and the process was not going off the rails otherwise, Sinn Fein would not drag out the process or pose new difficulties. He knew this from many contacts. But we should look carefully at the Mitchell wording. Mitchell had talked of "considering" parallel decommissioning. This was crucial. The Prime Minister said that the only possible interpretation of Mitchell was that, while the process might be "considered", something real would also have to happen during the negotiations, even if it was not known in advance how much decommissioning there would be or when it would take place. He wanted to continue to deal straight. Sinn Fein must not be given the impression that they could come into the talks and not decommission. We would reply to the letter to Quentin Thomas, but he could not guarantee that what we said on decommissioning would be what Sinn Fein wanted, although it would not be what the Unionists wanted either.

Ahern went over his own arguments again, but added that the Irish would be ready to help us with the wording of the reply. He also said that we should bear in mind that the Loyalist view of decommissioning was the same as that of the Republicans. Paddy Teahon said that in his view the issue was one of getting Sinn Fein engaged. Once they were in the talks, things would become possible. If we tried to go beyond "considering" decommissioning during the talks, we would never get that far. He believed that, in a funny kind of way, Sinn Fein were honourable and would not back away from what they had agreed in advance.

The Prime Minister said that he had made very clear in the House of Commons that, in our view, decommissioning during the negotiations meant genuine decommissioning during the negotiations. Ahern said that he saw no problem in that being the British Government's position. Sinn Fein recognised that the Unionists' position was also different. But this was not the same as saying that Sinn Fein would be forced to decommission during the negotiations. I said that if we tried to revert to wording which implied that "considering" decommissioning would be good enough, we could not possibly expect to retain

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the Unionists in the process. Ahern said that the fact remained that Mitchell had only referred to "considering" in his report.

The Prime Minister said that there was a real difference between us here. In our view, Mitchell had created a clear expectation that there would be decommissioning during the negotiations. It was impossible for us to say anything different from what we had already said. We could not imply that, if Sinn Fein did not want to decommission, that would be fine. Ahern said that the Irish Government would love Sinn Fein to decommission, but the stated position of both the republicans and the Loyalists was that they would not do this during the negotiations. They might be persuaded into it during the negotiations, but if they were told that they would "have to" decommission, that would simply prove too difficult. If they were discussing decommissioning in the talks in good faith, they should not be thrown out. Paddy Teahon added that no one had been able to define satisfactorily what parallel decommissioning might mean. In the substantive negotiations, there would not be bits of political progress which could be matched with bits of decommissioning. Political agreement would effectively only come at the end of the process. The same was true of decommissioning.

I explained the Unionists' fears that, if discussion was going on and it became clear that there would be no decommissioning, they would be forced to walk out, because there would not be a sufficient consensus to throw Sinn Fein out. The Unionists did not see why they should be put in that position. The Prime Minister commented that the Unionists also feared that the republican reluctance to decommission reflected their desire to keep their weapons so that they could use the threat of force, or actual force, if negotiation did not go as they wished. (Ahern said that he could understand this fear, based on what had happened during the last ceasefire.) The Unionists also feared that Adams was not really in charge of the republican movement. His own view was that, if we could get the talks moving, some of these difficulties would fall away. But we could not get the talks going unless people believed that there would be some decommissioning during the talks. He understood the Unionists' fears. Adams and McGuinness might wish to be normal politicians, but the Lurgan murders had come as a real jolt to him too, since they suggested that Adams was not really in charge. He accepted that Sinn Fein could not be thrown out of the talks if they were acting in good faith. But that begged the question of what good faith meant. More widely, he feared that there was a genuine disagreement about interpretation of Mitchell here. It would not be sensible to bring this out into the open. We would have to go on giving our interpretation of Mitchell, and would have to look at the wording of our reply carefully.

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Ahern said that he had always stuck to the Mitchell principles and to the Mitchell report. But he had to say that, as a practical issue, decommissioning was crackers, both for the IRA and the Loyalists. Giving up amounts of weapons, even several tonnes of Semtex, would make no difference in practice. But he agreed that, once the talks were under way, these issues could be looked at differently.

The Prime Minister repeated that we would look at the wording of our reply carefully. But he had to say that the Unionists were on a knife edge.

Drumcree

The Prime Minister said that the public comments of the Taoiseach and Ray Burke had created terrible problems. There had been a chance before these comments that the Orange Order would agree to a deal whereby their right to march was accepted, but they would not exercise it. But this now looked unlikely. We were looking at every angle of the problem, but it remained incredibly difficult. He hoped that, if the Taoiseach was asked about this again, he would say that he had already made his position clear, but understood the difficulties of the position of the British Government, and hoped that they would take their decisions in the interests of everyone. Saying more than that would only make the situation harder to handle.

Ahern said that he was conscious that Drumcree was only the first of a series of challenges, with 12 July, the Ormeau Road and the Apprentice Boys' March in Derry all as potential flash-points in the future. But he would continue to stress the effort that Dr Mowlem had put into finding an accommodation. He would not up the ante. He understood that we had to try to keep both sides happy.

The Prime Minister said that he was totally opposed to provocative or intimidating behaviour, but there was a right to march down public roads. He did not know himself why those concerned felt they had to exercise it in particular ways. But this was what made the situation very difficult.

Ahern said that he did not understand why the Orange Order could not return from church the way they had come. Tension was obviously stoked up by posters saying that the Protestants were winning 2 - 0. He had met the Garvaghy Road residents, and urged flexibility on them. But their line was that they had

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been at the receiving end for the last two years, and needed a breathing space. There were of course extremists on both sides, and he recognised the difficulty of our position. He added that he would hate to hear about our decision only when something happened at Drumcree and not before. That would make his life very difficult.

The Prime Minister promised that, when the decision had been made, the Taoiseach would be told immediately. He would try to speak to the Taoiseach himself if possible. The decision would of course be for the Chief Constable in the first instance, and rightly so.

Ahern said that he wanted to avoid the situation of the previous year, when the two Governments had been blasting each other in public. This created a hopeless situation. The Prime Minister said that he fully agreed. But he repeated his plea for the Taoiseach to be on his best diplomatic behaviour in what he said publicly. If we could get through the weekend without too big a problem, that would make life much easier.

Beaufort Dyke

Ahern said that he wanted to raise this. The way in which we had owned up to what had happened in the past was helpful. He now hoped the relevant Ministers could follow this up together. The Prime Minister said he had answered questions about this in the House of Commons the previous day.

Bloody Sunday

Ahern hoped that the material we had been given would be looked at and analysed in due time. He understood that the marching season might not be the best time to say anything about this. The Prime Minister said that we were indeed looking at the material we had been given.

Comment

The tête-à-tête was very friendly in tone, despite the clear disagreement over decommissioning. Ahern was at pains to sound constructive. The Prime Minister nevertheless believes that the new Irish Government is going to make the process more difficult, because they see themselves as negotiating for Sinn Féin by proxy. The Prime Minister commented afterwards that he has no difficulty in principle with replying to the letter to Quentin Thomas but we will

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need to look carefully at how this is done, particularly on decommissioning. One idea he had was that a copy of his statements in the House of Commons might be attached to any reply, without repeating the terms of these statements in the letter itself. I look forward to early advice on this.

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

Yours ac
John

JOHN HOLMES

Ken Lindsay Esq
Northern Ireland Office

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