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From: John Holmes  
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PRIME MINISTER

cc: Jonathan Powell  
Philip Barton

TRIMBLE

I spent 45 minutes with Trimble this morning at his request. He was friendly but a worried man. His obsession with the duplicity of the NIO came through even more strongly than usual. He claimed that all Northern Ireland officials bar one or two were obsessed with getting Sinn Fein into the talks, and were following a green agenda. He strongly implied, without actually saying so, that Mo was in the same camp.

Trimble feared that the real agenda of the NIO, as well as the Irish Government, the SDLP and Sinn Fein, was to get Sinn Fein into the talks, force the Unionists out of the talks, and then turn the process into a negotiation between the British Government and the nationalists, particularly Sinn Fein. He was not convinced that we would resist this process when it happened.

His particular concern was decommissioning. The decommissioning paper was totally inadequate, since it gave no real leverage over Sinn Fein to produce decommissioning, and the mechanisms would be used by the nationalist side to ensure that nothing happened. He had never been properly consulted about it, and had been lied to by NIO officials. He was fed up with being presented by Anglo-Irish faits accomplis – this was what had been done to Jim Molyneux.

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Trimble spelled out that the pressure from Paisley and McCartney, and from within his own party, was such that he would find it very difficult to stay in the talks at all without guarantees on decommissioning, and if he did would not be able to stay very long if it became clear there was no decommissioning in prospect. He wanted to go on with the talks process, but might be forced to conclude either at the end of July, or in early September, that there were simply too many risks for him in doing so. He might therefore prefer to see the talks process collapse, rather than risk the scenario he had already outlined.

I said that he was being unfair to the NIO and to Mo; that he should keep his eye on the main objective of a settlement, the basic outlines of which should be acceptable to him; that I understood his fears about the decommissioning paper but thought we would be able to bring some real pressure on Sinn Fein; that I saw no prospect whatsoever of HMG agreeing to talk to just the nationalist side in the talks (and in any case the rules of procedure made this impossible); and that we had seen no alternative way forward in the talks but to agree some kind of procedure on decommissioning. We would be delighted to see progress made by the participants without us and the Irish Government needing to take the lead, but there had been very little evidence of this. I added on the decommissioning paper that, while I understood his concern, the reality was that it would be very difficult to amend the paper significantly.

On the last point, Trimble accepted that amending the paper would be difficult. He might be able to live with parallel assurances about the speed of the decommissioning process, as long as these were visible and bankable. But he repeated that he saw very serious defects in the paper. If the Independent commission didn't start work until mid-September, and there could be no

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decommissioning schemes in place then, because they needed Parliamentary approval in both countries, how could anything possibly happen before December at the earliest? It was inconceivable that he could stay in the talks that long without some progress on decommissioning.

I said that the Unionists could prevent progress in the political talks at any stage. That was the lever in their hands. Trimble was not happy with the idea of simply filibustering for months. He did not see the other participants being ready to allow this. In any case, as he had said, his position would rapidly become untenable within his own party and within the unionist community in Northern Ireland more widely. He understood what I was saying about the kind of settlement we wanted, and could see that the alternatives to the talks process might not be better from his point of view. But he still felt he might have no choice at the end of the day but to collapse the talks process.

We argued around these points for some time, but without changing much.

Trimble was no doubt trying to make my flesh creep and to use me to put pressure on you. But I think he was being reasonably honest about the pressures he is under. He did not conceal the divisions inside the UUP, and the readiness of some of his colleagues to exploit them. The truth is that his own position may not be secure enough to take the kind of gamble we want him to take. In any case, this is confirmation, if any was needed, that the Unionists are on the knife edge.

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I do not conclude from this that all is lost. Trimble clearly does want to stay in if he can. But it will be hard to get him to do so. The NIO are working on ways of meeting at least some of his decommissioning worries. I see two other ways of helping:

- (i) More real consultation with the UUP (one of his principal complaints was that he was never really consulted). This is not easy because he is leaky and unreliable, but I think we need to do something to meet this concern.
- (ii) A private assurance in the strongest terms from you personally that we would not contemplate a negotiation without the Unionists. He really believes that this might happen, and that only you and your will stand between the NIO and this objective.

We might talk about this on Monday.



**JOHN HOLMES**

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