

DRAFT LETTER FROM MR THOMAS

Martin McGuinness MP Sinn Féin 51-55 Falls Road BELFAST BT12 4PD

...July 1997

You wrote to me on 2 July raising a number of specific questions on the aide memoire sent to you on 13 June and on the British and Irish Governments' proposals on decommissioning published on 25 June.

The Government's purpose in both papers was to set out its approach in clear terms on the key issues. It wants no genuine doubt or uncertainty to remain as a block to an unequivocal IRA ceasefire and inclusive negotiations. But it will not negotiate a ceasefire.

The Government is also serious about the timetable it has set out. It is determined to see substantive political negotiations under way in September. It wants Sinn Féin to be part of those negotiations, but that can only follow a genuine and unequivocal IRA ceasefire which is seen to be matched by word and deed. So, while the Government will do all it can to ensure its approach is clearly and fully understood so as to achieve this objective, it will not be drawn into open-ended exchanges intended to delay the timetable.

With that in mind, I shall concentrate on what we understand to be Sinn Féin's key concerns.

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The Prime Minister has repeatedly made clear his determination to see a negotiated settlement agreed and implemented. As he said in his statement to the House of Commons:

"I want to move as rapidly as possible to an agreed political settlement. The situation in Northern Ireland means that delay is not acceptable."

As he also said in his speech in Belfast on 16 May:

"This Government is fully committed to the approach set out in the Downing Street Declaration. I believe the Joint Framework Document sets out a reasonable basis for future negotiation. We must create, through open discussion, new institutions which fairly represent the interests and aspirations of both communities."

Overall agreement will only be achieved if all the issues on the table are resolved to the satisfaction of the participants. A successful outcome can only be based on the consent of both nationalists and unionists achieved through dialogue and negotiation.

Decommissioning is one - but by no means the only one - of the critical issues which need to be resolved satisfactorily. Both the British and Irish Governments share the view that:

"... voluntary and mutual decommissioning can be achieved only in the context of progress in comprehensive and inclusive political negotiations."

It is in this context that both Governments:

"... acknowledge a particular responsibility to carry the process forward with energy and determination so as to build confidence without blocking the negotiations."

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Buitin (mement) heling on Home of Commissioning is and in and the strategy adopted by this Government in respect of the decommissioning issued is based fully on the Mitchell Report. The joint proposals would mean that substantive political negotiations get under way at the same time as the mechanisms necessary to agree the modalities of decommissioning - an International Commission and a Liaison sub-Committee of all the participants - start their work.

The joint proposals would also provide a regular review mechanism to consider developments across the negotiations as a whole and to consider whether the necessary confidence and momentum towards agreement is being sustained. This would allow each participant to raise concerns about progress on any issue in any part of the negotiations, but it does not provide a mechanism to block the negotiations. When difficulties and blockages arise, as they undoubtedly will on any one of a number of issues, the proposals would provide for the Independent Chairmen to offer their judgement from time to time on the need for progress on particular issues if confidence and momentum towards agreement is to be sustained.

approach

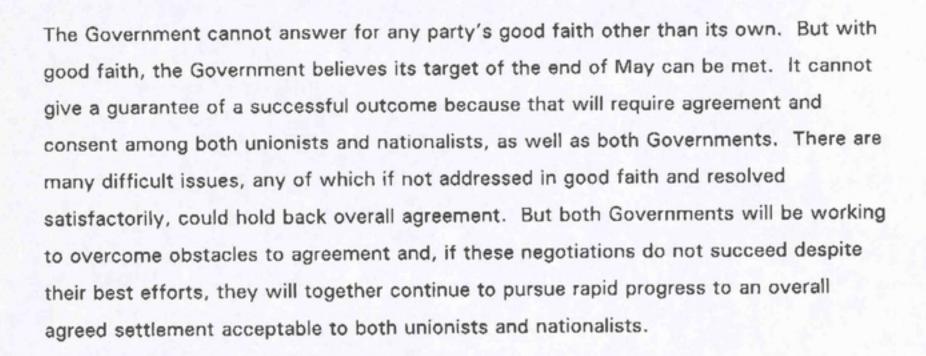
The Government believes that this strategy offers the best prospect of building confidence without blocking the negotiations, providing the commitments which all participants would need to make are entered into and followed through in good faith. Good faith is essential. That is why, if a party demonstrably dishonours its commitment to the Mitchell principles, it is no longer entitled to participate. But this is the only ground for exclusion once a party has joined the negotiations. Although any party can bring such an allegation, any appropriate action is for the two Governments alone.

We look for a benign mutual dynamic on all the issues in the negotiations, as the Mitchell Report envisages, so that as mutual progress is made on political issues and decommissioning, this can create growing mutual trust and confidence on all sides. Accordingly both Governments are committed to:

"... work to bring about due progress on decommissioning alongside progress in the substantive political negotiations."

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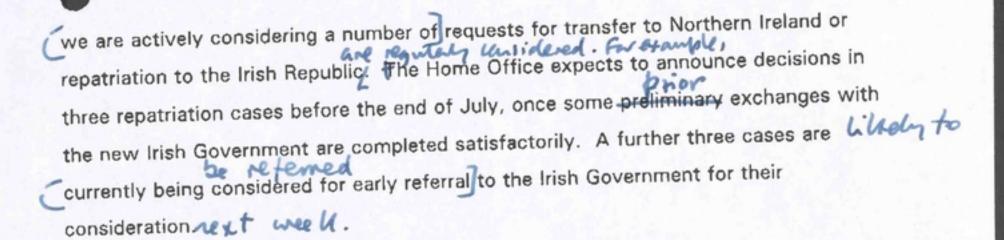
On confidence-building, as you acknowledge, the Government has set out the principles of its approach on all the issues you raise. Implementation of specific measures inevitably takes time. It would be wholly unrealistic to expect an immediate and detailed programme of measures on what is a very wide-ranging agenda. But if Sinn Féin, following an unequivocal ceasefire, joins the negotiations, then it will have the opportunity to raise and explore these important issues.

Progress on some, including those suggested in chapter VII of the Mitchell Report which are envisages a two way process of confidence building including measures the IRA should to take, can only follow a restoration of the IRA ceasefire. But the joint proposals include the establishment of a sub-Committee on Confidence-Building Measures, "... charged with assisting the implementation of all aspects of the Report of the International Body relating to the further confidence-building measures mentioned in that report which participants may raise..."

On prisoners, the aide memoire recognised the particular sensitivity of prisoner issues on all sides. The Government is committed to ensuring that prisoners are treated with dignity and respect and subject to no more security restrictions than the risk to the public requires. It is also committed to the principle that prisoners should serve their sentences close to their family, wherever practicable. In accordance with this principle,

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As to the other issues you raise, my understanding is that you regard these as essentially 'housekeeping' details. I can confirm that, as envisaged in the aide memoire, Ministers will meet Sinn Féin in the period immediately following a ceasefire. As to meetings with the Prime Minister, once Sinn Féin has joined the negotiations and made its commitment to the Mitchell principles, these would be dealt with on the same basis as for other participants. The rules of procedure for the negotiations set out the structure, sequence and conduct of the negotiations, how the agenda is to be adopted and the role of the Chairmen and the Business Committee in convening and scheduling meetings.

The Government has established its good faith in setting out a clear approach and in removing any genuine uncertainties which remain. What now needs to be cleared up without further delay is whether the IRA will declare a genuine and unequivocal ceasefire, which alone can permit Sinn Féin to join the political negotiations when they get under way in September.

As I said when we last spoke [on Friday] I hope you will find that this letter provides the reassurance you seek.