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Oifig an Taoisigh
Office of the Taoiseach

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- To Ken
Linda
(NIO)
12/6/97
16:15

12th June, 1997.

The Rt. Hon. Tony Blair MP
The Prime Minister.
10 Downing Street.

Dear *Tony*

Thank you for your letter of 11 June, and enclosed draft of an aide-memoire.

Let me say firstly how deeply all of us in Ireland appreciate the priority which you and your Government are giving the Northern Ireland issue. I believe such engagement on your part remains the enabling condition for progress on any front, and you can be assured it will evoke a correspondingly forthcoming approach from this, and I am sure, any other Irish Government.

Secondly, I agree with the approach implicit in your letter, that it is necessary to supply coherence and direction to a negotiating process which, on the indications of the past year, will simply run into the sands without it. Realistically, that impetus can only come from the Governments.

Thirdly, I feel your draft aide-memoire touches on the key points, and for the most part does so in ways skilfully calculated to be tolerable, even if not ideal, from the conflicting perspectives of both sides. Of necessity, the aide-memoire deals with these issues in very general terms. It would be crucially important that the subsequent elaboration of these broad points should be done sensitively and realistically in terms of the constituencies we are trying to reach, and I would hope our two systems would consult closely in this regard.

Oifig an Taoisigh, Tithe an Rialtais, Baile Átha Cliath 2.
Office of the Taoiseach, Government Buildings, Dublin 2.



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-2-

I have a number of comments on the draft aide-memoire which touch on these points of detail, and one point which I think goes rather deeper.

On the point of entry, I believe the problem is not so much the few weeks involved as the symbolism with which they may be invested. The longer the period, the greater the difficulty in that respect. I would hope that in favourable circumstances, the period might be shortened beyond what you envisage. In any event, it would be crucially important that the presentation of the period should as far as possible have no negatives for either side, and that intention should be clear from the outset.

On confidence-building measures, you will be aware of the importance of prisoner issues, and also of cultural/Irish language issues for perceptions on the nationalist side. I would hope that the aide-memoire, or at a minimum, its elucidation by your officials in any meeting with Sinn Féin, would respond constructively to these concerns.

The decommissioning issue is of a deeper order of difficulty. It is a goal we must achieve, but our capacity to do so will be in inverse order to the symbolic or tactical priority we allow it to assume.

The experience of the process so far suggests that the best, and probably only means of actually achieving this important objective is to ensure it is negotiated on the basis of the agenda so skilfully set out in the Mitchell Report. We must either persuade all participants to this course of action, or else the process founders on the issue.

I am concerned that your first paragraph on decommissioning might lend itself, perhaps inadvertently, to the interpretation that parallel decommissioning - a goal we both aspire to - was being given precedence over the more comprehensive agenda we have both invoked repeatedly, namely the implementation of all aspects of the Mitchell Report. No participant, including the Governments, should be precluded from highlighting any dimension of the Report it considers particularly crucial. However, any differing priorities or



Oifig an Taoisigh
Office of the Taoiseach

-3-

interpretations arising from the Report should be a matter for good-faith reconciliation within the process, not a specific doctrinal test to be imposed as a precondition for entry into negotiations on the issue. I am concerned that you draft, as it stands, might have the latter connotation and might be interpreted by those whose co-operation is needed for decommissioning as forcing them to meet this necessary challenge in conditions or in ways which minimise rather than maximise their chances of delivering it. We must indeed ensure the decommissioning issue is resolved as an indispensable part of the process, but we must be careful to select the most attainable path to the goal at any given time. I would urge therefore, that that part of your draft be recast to avoid potential misunderstanding, or any inadvertent diversion from the overall agenda of implementing the Mitchell Report in all its aspects.

I hope you find these comments of help. Again, may I say how much I appreciate your dedicated engagement on this issue.

You can be assured of the co-operation of the Irish Government and of all those who want, as I know you do, to lay this outdated conflict to rest.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'John Bruton', written in a cursive style.

Taoiseach