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From: John Holmes

Date: 2 July 1997

PRIME MINISTER

cc: Jonathan Powell
Alastair Campbell
Philip Barton
Pat McFadden

AHERN

This is a tricky meeting at an awkward time. We want the two governments to stick together.

Ahern's agenda, and particularly that of his advisers, is likely to differ from ours, and how much Drumcree is coming to overshadow everything else. Ahern has already made clear his opposition to a march going down the Garvaghy Road, and Ray Burke has gone even further, saying this would be "folly". This is very unhelpful – it has more or less killed any chance of the Orange Order being reasonable. Mo has told Ahern so. But Ahern is still bound to push you hard on this in the meeting, not least so they can say so afterwards. The Irish tell me that their private messages to the Garvaghy Residents are not to wind the situation up – they are aware that the Sinn Fein leader of the residents is looking for trouble – but they will not hesitate to take a pure nationalist line if the march goes ahead (and they will be popular in Ireland for doing so).

Meanwhile Sinn Fein are manoeuvring to get the Irish on their side in the wider picture, to squeeze more concessions out of us. I attach a new letter from McGuinness to Quentin Thomas. Frankly, what we are being asked to say and do is outrageous, and we can't do it. Quentin can reply, as we have made clear to the NIO, on condition it is cleared with us, but he will not be able to say much without risking losing the Unionists altogether. We must stick to the aide memoire in substance, in particular on decommissioning.

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PREM 49/111 Letter Holmes to the PM dated 02/07/97

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There is a risk in all this of us and the Irish going through a serious row, post-Drumcree, and the "nationalist consensus" forming against us again. We must avoid this if we can. But such rows are almost inevitable from time to time. And, as we have discussed, we have bent over backwards about as far as we can go. You will need to be firm with Ahern, and not give him the impression he can squeeze more out of us over the IRA. We were told Sinn Fein needed a date and some clarity about decommissioning. They have now got them and need to deliver.

You will also need to be firm about Drumcree. The Irish have a locus to be consulted, because of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, so we have to listen to their arguments. But at the end of the day, we have to answer for our decision – and one of the main Unionist paranoias is that our decisions are dictated by the Irish.

On decommissioning, you will not get Ahern to endorse explicitly our (common sense) interpretation of Mitchell. He will take refuge in the "precise words of Mitchell", which are ambiguous, and say decommissioning should be voluntary. But you should make clear that at the very least they must not undermine our interpretation.

... I attach some NIO briefing for the meeting. You may like to glance at this, despite its habitual length, particularly the bit on prisoners at the end. Ahern is likely to raise Sinn Fein's prisoners' concerns himself. But you may find the attached checklist more immediate use on the four main areas likely to be raised: Drumcree. Sinn Fein/IRA ceasefire, decommissioning, and Bloody Sunday.

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You may also want to talk briefly about Europe, to show that Northern Ireland does not have to dominate totally, and confirm our desire to improve "East-West" relations.

As I mentioned, the Taoiseach wants an initial tête-à-tête, with one adviser/note-taker each. Your preference is to meet completely alone. I have passed this on to the Irish. Personally, I see advantage in Ahern having someone else there to record your messages, even if this is the green Martin Mansergh.

Alastair is in touch with his opposite number about press handling. The Irish are likely to want a joint doorstep. We will try to avoid this if at all possible. But you will need to agree on what should be said as far as possible, and encourage Ahern not to give the impression that he has a separate agenda. A joint photo-call would be desirable on this occasion.

Finally, Trimble has been in touch, partly to advise you not to intervene personally over Drumcree (there was a story in a Belfast newspaper today that you might fly over yourself). I reassured him that this was nonsense. He also wanted a "chat" with me or Jonathan, about how he sees things following his letter to you. I have arranged to see him in his room at the House on Friday morning.



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