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Filed on:

From the Private Secretary

4 June 1997

Dear Gen,

CALL BY THE UUP, 4 JUNE

David Trimble and John Taylor called on the Prime Minister this afternoon for 50 minutes. Dr Mowlam was there on our side, as were Jonathan Powell and myself.

BSE

Trimble asked how the Prime Minister had got on with Santer, who had just left. Urgent action was needed on Northern Ireland (without upsetting Scotland, added Taylor). The Prime Minister said that he believed some progress had been made. He was not seeking publicity for this, but the Government was working very hard behind the scenes.

South Africa meeting

In response to the Prime Minister's question, Trimble said that this had gone reasonably well. He had been impressed by some of the South Africans he had met, particularly Moosa. He had also taken the opportunity for a good talk with the SDLP - Hume had not been there, but Haughey, Durkan and Farran had been. It had helped to remove frostiness in the relationship left over from the past. The SDLP leaders concerned were working on John Hume to support what had come out of the meeting. (Trimble did not elaborate on what this was.)

Belfast talks

Trimble asked whether we were going to try to get the settlement train moving rapidly. He wanted to see real progress in the next week or so. On decommissioning, he did not see why others could not simply sign up to the UUP

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paper of 1 October. John Major had suggested in a meeting some months ago that the Government might be moving in this direction but it had never happened. The point of the 1 October paper was to identify areas where action was needed, and set entry terms for Sinn Fein. If the UUP had reliable assurances on these points, they were ready to move straight into substantive talks. The key was to know what would happen if Sinn Fein joined the talks. They would have to sign up to the Mitchell principles, and agree to everything else which had already been agreed in the talks, including how to tackle decommissioning. As far as the UUP was concerned, there would also need to be a tranche of decommissioning before Sinn Fein could move into the substantive negotiations, although not before they joined the plenary. But he added that this was only the UUP position. Others did not have to agree to it. The UUP worry was that Sinn Fein would be parachuted into the talks and would try to change things which had been agreed. The UUP would then be left with no option but to walk out. The UUP did not want that, even if the talks themselves had to halt for a while.

Trimble repeated that the requirement for a tranche of decommissioning before Sinn Fein could enter the substantive talks was only the UUP position. It was not necessarily that of others and was not necessarily immutable if other circumstances were right. In other words, if the UUP was satisfied in other ways that Sinn Fein was acting in good faith, there might be no need for this tranche. Clinton had put it well in the press conference at Downing Street: the IRA should lay down their arms for good.

The Prime Minister wondered whether Sinn Fein could not be brought to accept the consent principle. Trimble thought not. It would mean accepting partition and explaining to their own people that the objectives of the war they had fought for 25 years could not be attained.

The Prime Minister said that he wanted to get Sinn Fein into the talks if he could do so. But his overriding wish was to move the talks on to the substance. He believed that there was more agreement in the middle ground about the solution than might sometimes appear. But decommissioning was a real obstacle.

I suggested that the UUP paper effectively amounted to prior decommissioning. Others would not accept this, and it was not compatible with our own support for parallel decommissioning. Trimble said that it was as close to parallel decommissioning as he could get. In any case it was only the UUP's position. The problem was that, if Sinn Fein came into the talks on terms different from this, the UUP would have to walk out. If they came in on the

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UUP terms, there would be problems but at least the talks themselves would not collapse.

In response to a question from the Prime Minister, Trimble said that the Loyalists appeared reasonable on the issue, but would jump ship as soon as real decommissioning was on the agenda. They might have to leave the talks soon anyway, because their ceasefire and their structures were collapsing. Getting into real negotiations without Sinn Fein there might in fact be the best way to keep the Loyalists in.

Dr Mowlam said this might be true, but there was no way this could happen without movement from the UUP, and the SDLP, on decommissioning. Everyone would have to make some movement on this subject. Otherwise the talks would not in practice be able to continue. Trimble repeated that he needed assurances about the Verification Commission and other details of the approach to decommissioning, and about what would happen if Sinn Fein entered the talks. No one actually had to do anything to allow progress to be made. The fact was that, if the substantive negotiations were underway when Sinn Fein came in, decommissioning was bound to rise to the top of the agenda in any case.

We repeated that we saw no chance of the talks moving on to the substantive negotiations as long as the UUP stuck to their current position on decommissioning. Taylor commented that McCartney had already left the talks and Paisley would soon follow. Dr Mowlam contested this, but said that in any case the Government did not want the UUP to walk out. We were doing our best to devise a procedural way forward which the UUP could accept. Trimble said that the UUP did not want to be in a position where it had no lever in its own hands over the continuation of the talks except to walk out. The fact was that, even if others signed up to the 1 October paper, and Sinn Fein came in, the UUP would still be accused of a sell out. Meanwhile the situation on the ground was bad.

I suggested that the UUP always had a lever on the talks, since no progress could be made in the substantive negotiations if they were not prepared to allow it. Trimble said that this was no good. If the talks were going on in circumstances which were unacceptable to the UUP, he would have to leave. He could not stay in and filibuster, and still retain credibility.

Dr Mowlam said that she was aware of the Unionists' concern that we appeared to be negotiating with Sinn Fein through official level meetings. She

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wanted to emphasise that the two meetings so far had been, as we had said, purely clarificatory. There would not be a meeting this week, although there might be another in future. Trimble asked how Dr Mowlam knew that the talks were just clarificatory. She should insist on tape recordings to check what was going on. The fact was that Sinn Fein were pushing HMG to see how soft we were.

The Prime Minister said he understood Unionist fears. The fact was that he was not going to negotiate with Sinn Fein. He was in any case beginning to worry that they were not prepared to play ball at all. Taylor quoted Bruton to the effect that Sinn Fein already knew all they wanted to know. He added that he had personally been shaken by the apparent return to violence of the IRA, and was at a loss to explain it.

The Prime Minister emphasised that he had meant what he said in his speech. He wanted to give Sinn Fein an opportunity to join the talks. But if they thought that, once they were in the talks, they could even begin to threaten any kind of return to violence, they were misjudging the situation. He would not tolerate them in the talks in these circumstances. It might well be that Sinn Fein would never be able to sign up to an eventual agreement. The reason he had spelt out his views on the Union so strongly in his speech was to make sure that Sinn Fein could not be under any illusion of what would happen in the talks. As far as he was concerned, the consent principle was vital and the real test of whether those in the talks were democrats or not. If Sinn Fein could be brought into the talks they would come under real pressure. They might then return to violence, but in doing so they would forfeit any sympathy even from their own supporters. Hitherto, they had been able to exploit the impression that they might have been somehow duped during the ceasefire or their entry held hostage to the Unionists or Conservative backbenchers. The present situation held no such excuses for them. They would have to decide whether they really wanted to be politicians, or whether they were simply terrorists with a political veneer.

Parades

The Prime Minister referred to the letter from the Orange Order to the Garvaghy Road residents. Did this make talks between the residents and the Orangemen more likely? Trimble saw no possibility of this. The Orange Order would not talk to Brendan McKenna. The residents would not talk to the Orange Order without him.

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Dr Mowlam agreed that this was the case. The trouble was that, even if Sinn Fein were manipulating the residents politically, Brendan McKenna did speak for them.

Trimble commented that, even if there were talks between the Orangemen and Brendan McKenna, there was no way Brendan McKenna would agree to a march down the Garvaghy Road. His objective would simply be to block yet another march somewhere else. Taylor said that the mood in Portadown was not good. Half the residents were booking holidays for the Drumcree period, while the other half could not wait for the confrontation. Trimble added that the Protestants in the Garvaghy Road were now under real pressure from the Catholic residents to get out before July. Meanwhile no intermediaries between the Orangemen and the residents were acceptable.

Dr Mowlam commented that Trimble and Hume might be able to have some effect, if they carried on talking, as they had started to do earlier in the afternoon. Trimble said that this might be worth trying, but the reality was that he could not deliver the Orangemen, and Hume could not deliver the Garvaghy Road residents - the latter were too much under Sinn Fein influence. Sinn Fein had found the perfect way of screwing up the political temperature in the Province without even appearing to be responsible for it.

The Prime Minister asked whether a way forward might not be to agree strict conditions for a march, making it clear that if they were not adhered to, there would be no march the following year. Trimble said that there had been no noise or triumphalism in 1996. However, the Portadown Orange Lodge had expanded in the past year, since many young locals were joining up in preparation for the Drumcree march. One option would be to go up the Garvaghy Road on the way to church and take the long way back. This might conceivably help.

Dr Mowlam said that both sides had tried to resolve the situation, as they saw it, but neither side was prepared to take the extra step to make agreement possible. The issues were too symbolic for both sides. She feared that the whole fabric of the Province could be under threat this summer. The Prime Minister said that he wished to reflect further on this grim prospect.

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Comment

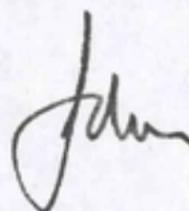
The conversation was friendly, but it was depressing on both the talks and the parades fronts. It is nevertheless possible that, on the talks, Trimble was sending a signal that he may be able to shift his ground on decommissioning. This is certainly worth exploring further.

There was some discussion between the Prime Minister and Dr. Mowlam afterwards about the next steps, particularly in the light of the latest information suggesting that PIRA had returned to violence in the Province. It was agreed that you would send us a revised game plan for the Prime Minister to look at over the weekend, with the aim of some kind of statement towards the end of next week. We would fix a meeting to discuss this early next week. The Prime Minister would then wish to see John Hume to make clear that, if he made an offer to Sinn Fein and it got nowhere, he would expect him to agree to take the negotiations forward without Sinn Fein.

As far as parades are concerned, it would be useful to have a brief account of your best assessment of what is likely to happen at Drumcree, and your proposed strategy for handling it. (I realise this can only be preliminary at this stage.) Could this also reach me for the weekend, please?

I am copying this to Jan Polley (Cabinet Office).

Yours ever



JOHN HOLMES

Ken Lindsay Esq
Northern Ireland Office

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