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File Mel

From the Private Secretary

2 August 1997

Dear Ken,

NORTHERN IRELAND

I had lunch with Paddy Teahon on 1 August, as he was in London for other reasons. He was in reasonably good form, and seemed to be enjoying life with the new Taoiseach – much more relaxed than his predecessor, according to Teahon. I detected some tension between him and Mansergh, but no real hostility, although he did comment at one point that Mansergh had an attitude of “ownership” to some parts of Northern Ireland policy. Teahon was also clearly pleased with the good relationship which the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach have struck up. I endorsed this. I added that the Taoiseach’s relationship with Sinn Fein was obviously very different from that of his predecessor, and indeed probably rather closer than we would like, but we could see the advantages of this as well as the possible disadvantages. Teahon seemed to like this way of putting it.

We ran through the main points on Northern Ireland. Like us, Teahon thought things had gone pretty well in the last couple of months – rather better than expected. The following points may be worth a mention:

- Teahon described the meeting between Ahern, Hume and Adams as “goodish”. Adams had gone into “De Valera” mode once or twice, lecturing the others on the need for a United Ireland in propaganda-speak, but had been relatively realistic at other times. Hume had spoken strongly on the need for Sinn Fein to do their bit in preventing trouble over marches. Ahern had pulled no punches with Adams over Ballsbridge in a separate private conversation.

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- I pressed the case for earlier establishment of the Independent Commission than the Irish currently envisaged, to avoid accusations that we (or at least the Irish) were not really interested in decommissioning. Teahon argued that it ought to suit Trimble better to have this concession later. We went round in circles. In practice, the question may become academic as August and the holiday season advance.
- Teahon asked how far we have thought through the problem likely to arise in November/December when political negotiations, with the best will in the world, would hardly have registered much actual progress, and the Unionists would be clamouring for decommissioning. I said that it was hard to predict precise scenarios. We hoped some of these issues would be easier with a ceasefire in place and people talking to each other. But we should avoid a situation where guns were being traded for political progress. Arguably, if the negotiations were at least well under way, even if no agreements had yet been reached, that could warrant a decommissioning gesture.
- I gave Teahon an account of the latest Prime Minister/Trimble encounter. He showed particular interest in Trimble's views on the relationship between North-South and East-West issues, and did not rule out some move in this direction if it would help.
- On decommissioning/consent wording, as discussed between the Prime Minister and Ahern, Teahon was worried that the Prime Minister had seemed to be suggesting in the latest accommodation that Sinn Fein would have to say something like this. I reassured him.
- We touched on the problem of the relative roles of de Chastelain and Mitchell. The Irish, as we know, do not want de Chastelain to chair the Independent Commission and Strand Two. I made clear the strong Unionist resistance to Mitchell chairing Strand Two. No immediate solution presented itself – Teahon volunteered that the Irish could accept de Chastelain chairing the Business Committee.

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- I put down markers with Teahon that if there appeared to be a close nationalist consensus before and during the negotiations, this could make life very difficult; and that the Irish should not assume that, in case of difficulty, the two governments could always get together and push something through - he would be aware of how the Unionists hated this. I also suggested that there was a link between these two points - the more there was an apparent nationalist consensus, the less we would be able to work closely with the Irish.

- we also discussed the difficulty of presenting any eventual settlement, given the obvious Unionist desire for whatever was agreed to be final and binding, and the nationalist requirement for it to be seen as a possible stepping stone to somewhere else. Teahon was very aware of the problem.

Altogether this was a useful occasion to compare notes and cement relationships, while also seeming to bring out some of the difficulties we will face. Teahon mentioned how useful he had found the dinner in Dublin with Sir John Chilcot earlier in the year. I said that I was sure we would be willing to repeat this (and have since mentioned the possibility to Sir John).

I am copying this Dominick Chilcott (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), Jan Polley (Cabinet Office), Sir John Kerr (Washington) and Veronica Sutherland (Dublin).

pp Philip Barton
JOHN HOLMES

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