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Prime Minister

NORTHERN IRELAND: A STRATEGY FOR THE SUMMER

Now is a good time to take stock. So far, despite a rollercoaster ride, we have a good story to tell:

- an IRA ceasefire, which itself is the best guarantee that the loyalist ceasefire will remain intact;
- a talks process still very much in being, despite serial walkouts by the DUP and UKUP;
- the UUP emphasising that they want to remain in the process and doing so at some political risk;
- even the DUP emphasising that it wants to participate in some political process even if, in another building and with other parties, Sinn Féin are also involved;
- an effective working partnership with the Irish Government, who have made a genuine effort to accommodate UUP concerns;
- a clear timetable, from September to May, for political negotiations which is accepted as a political fact; and
- the marching season, though there remains potential for serious confrontation over the Apprentice Boys' march in Londonderry on 9 August, has gone better than it looked at one time.

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Despite the difficulties ahead, this is a success story. It is a good deal better than the situation we inherited.

We should not be shy in claiming credit. We should not repeat the mistake of the last Government, which appeared grudging and embarrassed by the first cease-fire and consequently allowed Sinn Féin to capture the "peace" agenda. Instead, we should portray ourselves as the architects and drivers of the peace process. So over the summer we want to:

- demonstrate lots of preparatory work, with both the Irish Government and all the other parties, for the start of substantive negotiations on 15 September;
- engage positively with Sinn Féin without allowing them to dominate the agenda;
- engage positively with the UUP to have inclusive talks by September;
- continue to work on confidence on all sides;
- demonstrate in all our dealings that we deal straight and will stick to our word.

The talks process - broad strategy

Our first preference, Plan A, is to make the current talks process work. Working to get UUP agreement on decommissioning is the key to this, but we have to keep the Irish Government and SDLP (and so, Sinn Féin) on board as well.

If we fail, then we are still committed to getting political negotiations under way on 15 September. Plan B involves doing this through consultations in bilaterals and multilaterals, outside the current talks process but with the hope of returning to it in the future. The focus would be given by working towards proposals, working for agreement

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with the parties, to put to the people in a referendum and then to be implemented by Parliament in accordance with the triple lock.

One way or another, we can deliver on 15 September. Plan A has significant advantages, not least for us: it is a good deal easier to manage a round table process, than a diffuse bilateral one. But it is not Plan A or bust.

Ideal as it would be, it may be that getting everyone round the table in September simply imposes too much strain on all sides. Plan B may then be everyone's second best, although we would hope to return to round table discussions further down the road.

In any case, much of the preparation work is the same whether we are on Plan A or Plan B. We should keep both options open until September. We do not need to take a decision now.

The political process over the summer

We need, in particular, to work on three fronts: the Irish Government, the UUP and Sinn Féin.

(i) Irish Government

I meet Ray Burke next Tuesday. On Wednesday I pressed him strongly to establish the Independent Commission despite the defeat of our proposals. Although the Irish Government will not establish the Commission in formal terms now, they will engage with us over the summer in all the necessary preparatory work. This includes identifying Commission members, setting up the accommodation, having all the necessary agreements and statutory instruments ready etc.

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Though we can continue to press, I see little prospect of shifting the Irish Government to agree to the Commission's formal establishment. They will only do this before 15 September if Trimble signs up to the joint proposals. So our public presentation should major on all the preparatory work rather than whether or when the Commission is formally established.

For us the bottom line, if we are to keep open the chances of Trimble coming on board in early September, is that we must be able to say the Commission will be up and running, and have options for draft schemes available for discussion, from 15 September. The preparatory work on what the Irish Government described as a "virtual" Commission will mean that remains possible.

My officials are talking today with the Irish side about a statement for our meeting on Tuesday setting out all the preparatory work we plan on the Commission and the political negotiations. The current draft is attached as Annex A. If we can agree and announce this on Tuesday, it will put flesh on the bones of our commitment to have political negotiations under way on 15 September.

It might be helpful, before next Tuesday, if you were to ring the Taoiseach again. That might build bridges after the exchanges about "actual" decommissioning which, we know, left the Irish nervous that we were about to rat on them. But it would also help if you would reinforce my message that both Governments must be seen to engage in preparatory work on the decommissioning mechanisms we have proposed, alongside other preparatory work for the political negotiations.

(ii) Bringing the Unionists round

We still want to get the UUP on board for our decommissioning proposals if we can. So do the Irish Government. But we must continue to stand by our joint proposals, because the Irish Government will not move significantly beyond them.

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Realistically, the Irish Government will not:

- use words on actual decommissioning with which Sinn Féin are unhappy;
- agree to any threat that failure to decommission during the negotiations will have Sinn Féin thrown out of them;
- discuss draft schemes for decommissioning with the parties before the political negotiations start on 15 September.

Mr Trimble's own advice on how to help the UUP is the best. If he is able to move, it will only be shortly before 15 September. That will be the time to apply maximum pressure on both him and the Irish Government.

But, for this to work, Mr Trimble will need to believe the current proposals are just about the best offer he will get. He is currently telling people that he is confident the two Governments will come back with better proposals. While he believes that, he has no incentive to sign up to these proposals, which in fact are the only realistic ones on offer. So, for now, we should back off from Trimble on the decommissioning issue. He needs time and space to evaluate reaction to the IRA ceasefire and the mood of unionists. We have little to offer him of substance and what we have we should keep up our sleeve for September which can then be presented positively.

I suggest you send him a holding reply now, at Annex B. If he would like a meeting next week, see him; but then will not be the time either to press him or to offer him concessions on decommissioning. A general chat, perhaps reassuring him about the sort of settlement we are working towards, would be best. You should also confirm our commitment to consent and to the triple lock as he is fearful that we are going to override him.

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Unionism is currently in a state of some ferment. There are some negative forces at work but also a good many positive ones. Even the DUP, who have walked out of the current talks process, are emphasising that they want to be involved in some sort of process. Indeed, the process they describe is close to Plan B.

It could well be that, come September, Trimble will prefer Plan B for the time being to a Plan A which requires him to buy in to much the same proposals on decommissioning as he has just rejected. We should keep in touch with Trimble over the summer, reassure him and then reassess the situation in late August as his consultations proceed. We are also considering either commissioning ourselves or encouraging others to commission some form of opinion polling in Northern Ireland. This would need to be carefully timed and intended to show popular support for parties making progress in negotiations.

(iii) Engaging Sinn Féin in the political process

Our fundamental objective for the summer is to see the ceasefire intact and Sinn Féin join the political process.

We must manage the summer months in such a way that:

- we give Sinn Féin the confidence that we will stick by our word, that we want to see them in the political process and that we are not out (as they thought the last Government was) to divide and defeat them;
- while, at the same time, giving unionists and most people in Northern Ireland the confidence that we will stand by fundamental principles of peace and democracy and will treat Sinn Féin fairly but without giving them favours.

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So I plan a measured engagement with Sinn Féin over the next six weeks:

- officials are in touch about a preparatory meeting at official level for next week;
- Senator Mitchell and the other Independent Chairmen are likely to see them next week also;
- I plan to meet them the following week; (now confirmed for 6 August).
- Sinn Féin will have access to Castle Buildings throughout August.

After my first meeting there will only be three weeks left until we are due to take a decision on the ceasefire by the end of August. One, or at most two, more Ministerial meetings with Sinn Féin would be necessary. We shall publicly present these meetings as:

- a chance to build confidence on both sides: it must be seen as a two-way process;
- an opportunity to prepare Sinn Féin for the political realities they will face in entering the negotiations;
- a chance to cement the peace process.

Sinn Féin will inevitably have a list of issues they wish to raise. We shall work hard to identify our own agenda to put alongside theirs.

We also need to prepare the ground carefully for my decision, around the end of August, on whether Sinn Féin meet the requirements to be invited to participate in the talks. We told Sinn Féin this would be a political judgement of all the circumstances in the round.

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So we should be careful not to create the impression that we will take the decision on the basis of single issues such as punishment beatings or targeting and surveillance. The media are very ready to seize on such apparently simple tests. The danger is that we erect such tests in the public mind but, despite some beatings and the like, find that "in the round" we judge Sinn Féin have met the requirements. After all, it will be difficult to ignore the weight of evidence provided by the absence of bombings and shootings. Then it will look as if we have backed down on these tests. This is the mistake the last Government made: it undermined trust on both sides of the community.

Instead we should play down the significance of the decision, presenting it as only one step on a long process. We should, by contrast, play up the step Sinn Féin will have to take immediately on joining the talks: their total and absolute commitment to the Mitchell principles which we should present as effectively a renunciation of terrorism.

Conclusion

We have a great opportunity for progress. There are many ways in which it could still go wrong. But all the parties are emphasising that they want to remain engaged in a political process.

You may want to discuss the strategy in this minute. But, in the meantime, I shall seek to implement it in my meeting with Irish Ministers next week and others.

I am sending a copy of this to Sir Robin Butler.

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