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File

SUBJECT  
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From the Principal Private Secretary

9 October 1996

Dear Ken

**PRIME MINISTER'S MEETING WITH DAVID TRIMBLE MP**

The Prime Minister met David Trimble for about forty minutes in the margins of the Conservative Party Conference in Bournemouth today. Mr Trimble appeared initially somewhat tense and nervous, but relaxed and became more thoughtful as the conversation progressed.

The Prime Minister said the key issue was how to react to the PIRA bombs in Lisburn on Monday. He would be discussing this further with the relevant Ministers next week, and would be looking for advice from the Police and Army about stepping up security. This would also be the right moment to launch a propaganda offensive against Sinn Fein, particularly in the US; he thought it would be helpful if Mr Trimble went to the US to do interviews and meetings.

On the political process, the Prime Minister thought it was inconceivable that Sinn Fein could join the talks, probably this side of the General Election, unless against expectations they now came up with a really credible ceasefire. It was unclear at present what the SDLP's reaction would be, and whether they would be willing to continue with the talks even if Sinn Fein were excluded. PIRA's return to violence also meant that the approach to decommissioning needed to be reconsidered. We wanted to maintain the Loyalist ceasefire and keep them in the talks. But it was not credible that they would start decommissioning while PIRA resumed violence "That's right" said Trimble). In general, we needed to maintain an even-handed approach to the talks, since if the Irish and US Governments were to feel they were one-sided, that would only help Sinn Fein.

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Mr Trimble agreed that it was inconceivable Sinn Fein could enter into the talks for as long as could now be foreseen. The question was how that should be expressed. Your Secretary of State, when he had seen him this morning, had been toying with the idea of giving PIRA a month to come up with a credible ceasefire or else they would be locked out of the talks for at least six months. Mr Trimble had some doubts about that proposition, but he accepted that there were difficulties over how to express Sinn Fein's exclusion from the talks. The Irish Government would want to leave the door open in the event of a genuine ceasefire. But if we were too generous on language in that direction there would be difficulties for the Loyalists. On decommissioning, Mr Trimble thought the problem could be made irrelevant if there was suitably precise language on what would be required for a credible ceasefire.

The Prime Minister said he had not yet had a chance to discuss with your Secretary of State the idea of a one-month deadline to Sinn Fein. He would be discussing this and other issues next week. Mr Trimble and the Prime Minister speculated on PIRA's motive in resuming their bombing campaign in Northern Ireland. Mr Trimble thought they would have wanted to demonstrate their continuing capabilities following their setbacks with the arrests and seizures in London; they would not want to risk another mainland attack until they knew what had gone wrong. Another possibility was that Adams and McGuinness might have feared being pushed into such action by the planned General Army Council and had decided to pre-empt that.

Mr Trimble said the UUP had had great difficulty engaging the SDLP in bilateral talks. They had been trying since August with little success. He agreed with the Prime Minister that it was difficult to know quite how the SDLP would now react. There was a risk they would walk away from the talks, but it must be right to press ahead. There was a brief discussion about Hume's approaches to the British Government on his contacts with Sinn Fein. The Prime Minister made clear that the line the Government had taken was that what it said in public was the same as what it said in private, and that there had been no change in the Government's position. Whether there was any future in those exchanges must be doubtful.

The Prime Minister asked Mr Trimble what steps on tightening security he thought might be necessary. Mr Trimble said he supported the RUC's wish to allow transcripts of phone interceptions to be used in evidence. The law should be changed to make such evidence admissible, though it would of course be necessary to decide in each case whether it was sensible to reveal the methods used by the security forces. He accepted that discovery (in the legal sense) could be a problem. The Prime Minister said he would look into this again. Mr Trimble also wondered whether some action might be necessary on



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border crossings. He would need to speak to Ken Maginnis about this, who was currently overseas. The Prime Minister noted the importance of stepping up cooperation with the Garde.

Mr Trimble said he was being pressed to meet some of the Loyalist groups, and would be doing so tomorrow. One thing they attached importance to was more moves on prisoners, for example being more sympathetic on compassionate leave. The Prime Minister noted it was difficult to do this for Loyalist but not Republican prisoners. Mr Trimble thought any action could be based on individual circumstances.

In conclusion, Mr Trimble said he hoped the Government would move quickly on measures to rebuild confidence among the Unionist community. Ways needed to be found to advance and speed up the talks. If decommissioning could be parked (as he believed possible), and the requirements for a ceasefire defined carefully, then rapid progress could be made.

The Prime Minister said he thought it would be helpful if he and Mr Trimble meet again, after he had had further discussions with Ministers. In the meantime, he would seek advice from Sir John Kerr about the best timing for a visit to the US by Mr Trimble.

Follow-up

The Prime Minister would be grateful for advice on using phone intercepts as evidence and on whether any action on prisoners is feasible. I believe you are already planning to offer advice on future progress on the political talks and the conditions for Sinn Fein's admittance. John Holmes will discuss with John Kerr the timing of a visit to the UK by Mr Trimble.

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

Yours  
Alex

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