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Filed on:

10 DOWNING STREET
 LONDON SW1A 2AA

From the Private Secretary

2 September 1997

Dear Ken,

MEETING WITH THE ALLIANCE, 2 SEPTEMBER

Lord Alderdice, accompanied by Seamus Close, called on the Prime Minister for 35 minutes this morning, the meeting having been postponed from the previous day because of the death of Diana, Princess of Wales. Jonathan Stephens was also there.

Alderdice began by referring to the tremendous emotion at Princess Diana's death, not only in Northern Ireland but also in the Republic. On Northern Ireland itself, he said that the summer had gone remarkably well - the Orange Order had clearly looked at the prospects after Drumcree, and had withdrawn from the abyss. He thought Jim Molyneux had played a useful role in this.

Turning to the current situation, he had had a long meeting with Trimble at the end of the previous week. He had no doubt that Trimble wanted to stay in the talks. He appeared to be consulting all those who he already knew would advise him to do so. However, he did have a serious problem in his party, and he had of course also created a problem for himself over decommissioning. The Alliance had told him that the first step over this was to stop digging. But it would obviously be good if he could be given some kind of help. He wondered whether, if the international body made a statement saying what they needed, and this was agreed, this could be part of a useful package, even if the international body would only be asking for what was already available. Meanwhile, it was necessary to ensure that new problems did not arise. Dr Mowlam's comments in the Belfast Telegraph on consent had been a disaster, and had seriously destabilised the Loyalists.

The Prime Minister said that no change of policy on consent had been intended. He had taken pains to tell the Sunday Times in his interview that the principle of consent remained absolute. Meanwhile we were trying to help

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Trimble to stay in the talks by agreeing wording with the Irish on consent as the guiding principle in the talks. We were also looking at wording to make clear that both Governments wanted to see decommissioning happen during the negotiations, and at a wider range of confidence-building measures. It was very important that Trimble did stay in the process.

Alderdice agreed. If he did not stay in the process, it would have to continue without him, but a way would have to be found to associate him with it. He wondered whether, if the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach were to attend the opening of substantive talks on 15 September, this would make it more difficult for Trimble to absent himself. There was also the question of a meeting between the Prime Minister and Adams. He believed that the sooner the Prime Minister met Adams in one context or another, the better it would be. Adams should not be allowed to develop the absence of a meeting as a grievance. If the Prime Minister attended the beginning of the substantive talks, this would provide one appropriate context.

The Prime Minister said that he would meet Adams whenever he thought it helpful to do so. He had no internal or external problem about doing this. But his concern now was to make sure the Unionists did not feel that the summer had been a purely one-way process, and to find a way to allow Trimble to stay in the process on a basis which he could present as decent.

Alderdice commented that Trimble was very concerned about the possibility of RUC reform being taken forward through an Order in Council, not legislation. This was in fact a sensitive issue across the spectrum in Northern Ireland, not just for the Unionists. It could be addressed as part of the talks process, but it should at least be subject to scrutiny in Parliament, to let the Unionists and others have a proper say. The Prime Minister said that we were indeed looking at this and he was grateful to Alderdice for raising it.

Alderdice continued that he assumed Paisley and McCartney would not stay in the talks themselves, although Paisley, or at least Robinson, would no doubt want to find a way back in if they went ahead. He had been very interested to find that Trimble, who had in the past wanted the negotiations to take time, was now keen on a short time-table to ensure that his position could not be undermined by Paisley, particularly in the run-up to any elections. Trimble agreed that the need was to get down to the issues of substance quickly, particularly Strands 2 and 3. He had found this encouraging. The Prime

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Minister commented that he had always believed that, once the process started, it had to press on quickly or it would slip back.

Alderdice suggested that there should be more openness about the talks. It was a myth to believe that Northern Ireland politicians were more reasonable behind closed doors. Some televised sessions might be worth trying. They might help to persuade people like Paisley that they could not be left out. Opening the process up in this way could also help to get some popular momentum behind it. He also believed that there would be an opportunity to build on the presumed success of the Scottish and Welsh referendums to persuade people in Northern Ireland that it was wrong for them to have less autonomy than either Scotland or Wales. One potential problem he saw was that Sinn Fein might try to re-open the basis of sufficient consensus in the talks, in order to ensure that they could not be over-ruled. There would be real problems if they did this.

The Prime Minister said that he was not naïve about Sinn Fein. He hoped that the leadership were telling their troops internally that the ceasefire was only tactical in order to bring them along, while their real intention was to get into mainstream politics, but it was hard to be sure about this. In any case, any threats of violence in the process would be quite unacceptable. Alderdice commented that keeping Sinn Fein in the process would be a different challenge from getting them there. The previous Government's handling of Loyalist violence during the talks had made it hard to exclude Sinn Fein even if Republican violence resumed, as long as Sinn Fein could plausibly argue that they were trying to stop the violence.

The Prime Minister said that it would be very hard for Sinn Fein to convince anyone that they had no influence on the process, when punishment beatings had for example been turned off like a tap. Central control in the Republican movement was clearly very strong. Close agreed, but said that this could in fact make it more difficult to deal with Sinn Fein if violence resumed in some way. He foresaw a danger of the real democrats being forced out of the talks, not those whose attachment to democracy was suspect.

The Prime Minister said that the key sticking points in the substantive talks would be North/South co-operation and consent. If agreement could be reached on these issues, he believed a settlement capable of being endorsed by a referendum would be possible. This could resolve the problem at least for a generation. However, he found it difficult to understand what Sinn Fein

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expected to get out of a settlement. Surely they did not expect to achieve a united Ireland? Alderdice said that he had been thinking about the same thing. In his view, if Hume and Adams had indeed reached agreement on the way forward, Hume would be going for the Irish Presidency. Decapitating the SDLP in this way would allow Sinn Fein to take over the Nationalist vote, and compensate them for any immediate failure in the talks. In his view, Hume had reached the conclusion a long time ago that the SDLP was ultimately expendable. So there might be a way forward which would keep Sinn Fein in the process, even if it was extremely unpalatable. (Comment: it was not entirely clear from what Alderdice said whether he thought Hume and Adams did have such an understanding or not.)

The Prime Minister asked for Alderdice's view of Adams. Alderdice said that he was intelligent, courteous, determined, tough and capable. He had the charisma necessary to lead the Nationalist community. But he did not have as much breadth of vision as some people thought, and was more trapped in a Republican mindset than was often appreciated. McGuinness, by contrast, was a cold person without charisma and more of a simple terrorist than Adams. Close added that one striking feature was their joint determination that there should be no split in the Republican movement. There was talk of the need to accept an interim solution, but if the hard-liners in the movement were of sufficient number, he believed Sinn Fein would take what they could from the present process, in terms of acceptance of a central role for them, and go back to violence for a while. They would then be ready to re-start a political role at a future date from the point where they had left off. This was of course what the Unionists feared.

The Prime Minister said that many people shared this view, but he doubted whether it was in fact a viable strategy for the Republicans. It was not clear that the Americans or the Irish would be ready to allow this to happen. The political context had changed both in Ireland and in the US. Once the real civil rights issues in Northern Ireland had been effectively tackled, it could not be seriously presented as a problem like Palestine or South Africa. Meanwhile he foresaw real difficulty for Sinn Fein in presenting a settlement as only a transitional solution, when everybody else would be saying effectively the opposite.

Alderdice wondered about the possible value of Ireland returning to the Commonwealth, an idea which had been suggested to him as long ago as 1991. This would change the context against Republican ambitions. It was notable that Irish hostility to Britain in general was diminishing. For example, he had no

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doubt that Princess Diana's funeral would be watched by everyone in the Republic, as well as in Northern Ireland. The Prime Minister commented that younger generations had a different perspective on Northern Ireland from their predecessors. It would be helpful to get this message across in the talks in some way.

Alderdice returned to the possibility of a meeting between Adams and the Prime Minister. A meeting in Downing Street would be redolent with history for Adams, because he would be sitting across the table from a British Prime Minister, as Michael Collins had in the 1920s. In this sense, Adams was still living in the 1920s. It would be important to get Republicans to face up to the fact that they lived in the past as much as the Unionists.

The Prime Minister thanked Alderdice for these perceptions, and asked him to stay in close touch. It was helpful to have a balanced view from time to time. Alderdice said that he enjoyed good relations with all the parties, including Sinn Fein and opposition parties in the Republic. It was unfortunate that the Alliance did not have more success in elections, but this reflected the natural tendency of voters to move to the extremes during a long running constitutional crisis.

BSE

Alderdice raised this briefly. The previous Government had been fearful of allowing Northern Ireland to move ahead of the rest of the United Kingdom in terms of resuming exports, because this might prove to be the end of the process rather than the beginning. His own feeling was that Northern Ireland could be an effective trail-blazer for others. The Prime Minister said that he was aware of this view. He would be discussing the way forward with colleagues again soon.

Springvale Campus

Alderdice said he could not understand why the previous administration had not been more positive about redevelopment plans. Both sides of the community in Northern Ireland supported them. He suspected that the real reason for opposition lay in internal arguments inside the educational establishment. In practice, the plans would create opportunities for all kinds of people from a deprived area to benefit. It was worth looking at the project with a fresh pair of eyes. The Prime Minister said that he believed that some new

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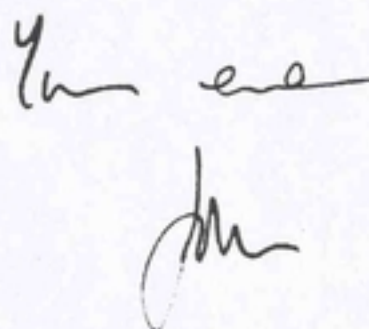
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proposals were being worked up. The Government would certainly look at these carefully. He would ensure he was kept up to speed on these plans.

Comment

This was a useful meeting, in which Alderdice made some interesting points. He seemed to have got over his critical mode of the summer and to be fairly positive about Government policy. His comments to the press afterwards were also helpful.

I am copying this letter to John Grant (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), Jan Polley (Cabinet Office) and by fax to Sir John Kerr (Washington) and Veronica Sutherland (Dublin).

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'John Holmes', with a stylized flourish at the end.

JOHN HOLMES

Ken Lindsay Esq
Northern Ireland Office

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