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From the Private Secretary

30 July 1997

IRELAND
Situation Pt 7

Dear Ken,

MEETING WITH DAVID TRIMBLE, 30 JULY

The Prime Minister met Trimble for 45 minutes this afternoon in the House of Commons. As you know, it had been intended to be entirely private, but the fact of it emerged in advance. It was agreed in advance that neither side would talk to the press afterwards about what had been discussed. Trimble was alone. Jonathan Powell and I were there on our side.

The Prime Minister explained that he had thought it better to talk to Trimble before sending him any kind of letter. He believed that, with suitable pressure, he might be able to extract a little more out of the Irish on the key issues. But they would not move unless they could be persuaded that this would unblock the impasse over decommissioning. Meanwhile, he wanted to carry on with the present talks process, not least because he suspected that Sinn Fein wanted it to collapse. Sinn Fein would find the process difficult once they were inside it, because they would be faced with the reality of the likely shape of a settlement.

Trimble asked about progress on the Independent Commission. He was not surprised that the Irish had reneged on their commitment to set this up by the end of July. I explained where things stood with the Irish. The Prime Minister said that he would talk to the Irish again about this.

Trimble said that he would be frank about his position. He could not make a clear prediction about staying in the talks until September. He had been encouraged by some of the signals he had received, but there were plenty of negative signals as well, so he was waiting to see how matters fell out. Meanwhile, he needed to know how the talks would proceed, and particularly how consent would be dealt with. If he was to sign off on decommissioning

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arrangements which were less than satisfactory, he needed something else to point to. He would also prefer a rather clearer picture on how we saw the outcome of the talks process. He was not suggesting that this could be sorted out in advance of the negotiations themselves, but he would still appreciate a better steer than he had at present.

The Prime Minister said that he agreed that it was probably best to give the situation a bit of time to develop. Meanwhile, he would talk again to the Irish not only about the Independent Commission, but about words on actual decommissioning, and about consent. He might just be able to get the Irish to agree to a reference to consent as a "guiding principle in the talks".

Trimble said that this would be some comfort. He had particularly resented the way decommissioning had been negotiated through an effective Anglo/Irish diktat.

Turning to the shape of the settlement, the Prime Minister suggested that there was a reasonable degree of consensus on the idea of a devolved Assembly. Trimble agreed, but said that there was a problem with the idea of the panel where each member would have a veto. This would effectively give each community a veto and was a recipe for breakdown. It was modelled on the old Cyprus constitution - look what had happened to that. On the electoral system, he was keen on the PR system just proposed for the new Scottish and Welsh Assemblies. It would be much better than Single Transferable Vote. The Assembly would have to be run through a tight party caucus system. This could not be done if an STV system was used.

The Prime Minister asked about power sharing in practice. Trimble said this would be done through Assembly Committees rather than through the old system of Cabinet Government. This would give the minority community a share in Government in the sense of participation, although how much real power they would have would depend on the precise make up of the Assembly. More widely, he felt that the arrangements set out in the Joint Framework Document just had too many checks and balances to be workable.

The Prime Minister said that he assumed North/South arrangements would be more contentious. Trimble agreed, but said that it was not only North/South arrangements, but also the East/West set up which was important and contentious. The present Anglo/Irish Agreement meant that the Inter-Governmental Conference could only talk about Northern Ireland. A British

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Isles/Irish Agreement was needed so that all other areas of interest could also be discussed. This would genuinely bring in the regional dimension of the UK, particularly following devolution in Scotland and Wales. The aim was to put the North/South relationship in a much broader East/West context. This would make it much easier to accept.

As far as the North/South arrangements themselves were concerned, he thought these would be not too difficult when the time came, as long as there was no effective Dublin override, as provided for in the nastier bits of the Joint Framework Document. The point was that Dublin could always appeal upwards to the Anglo/Irish Agreement where the Unionists had no standing at all.

The Prime Minister asked whether the list of areas to be covered under the North/South arrangements caused problems for the UUP. Trimble implied that they did not, but said there was another longer list, which had never been published. He knew of its existence because Michael Ancram had clearly read from such a list at a meeting several years before. NIO civil servants had also discussed this list with Paul Bew. The latter had refused to disclose it. He would still like to see this list.

... Trimble then handed over to the Prime Minister the attached paper proposing a "Council of the British Isles". He said that this had been produced for the 1992 talks but never tabled because the discussions had never got that far. His colleagues did not know he was giving the Prime Minister the paper. A new title would be needed for the proposed Council, because the word British was too neuralgic. But otherwise he thought the contents remained generally valid. The idea was to put the Belfast/Dublin relationship in the context of this broader body so that there was nothing special about the Belfast/Dublin relationship. This would make it possible to talk about issues such as the common travel area, marine pollution etc. Minor adjustments to the 1985 Anglo/Irish Agreement would not do. He thought a new agreement could be easier to negotiate with Fianna Fail because the 1985 Agreement was a Fine Gael document which Fianna Fail had criticised at the time.

The Prime Minister asked whether Trimble thought agreement with Hume on a settlement would in fact be possible. Trimble thought it possible in theory, but it would be very difficult to detach Hume from Adams. The Prime Minister commented that, once Sinn Fein were inside the talks, Hume's interests should logically be different from theirs. He would then need to break out from his

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present approach, not least because it would be in the interests of the SDLP as a party to do so.

The Prime Minister went on that he had talked briefly to President Clinton at the weekend. Clinton was willing to give what help he could, for example by creating an expectation in Northern Ireland that something new and different was really happening. It would be necessary to build up Trimble and Hume as the real players in the negotiations.

Trimble said that this would be fine, but the important thing was that Northern Ireland should be genuinely treated as if it were part of the UK. Northern Ireland had not been considered in this way for 25 years, for example, over scrutiny of legislation. He would be discussing this with Dr. Mowlam the following day, as well as the Northern Ireland Grand Committee.

The Prime Minister said that he assumed Trimble was happy to see Scotland and Wales being given new Assemblies. Northern Ireland would then be less obviously a special case. Trimble said that he had indeed felt more comfortable with the proposed new constitutional set up in Britain. He would like Northern Ireland to move in the same direction as Scotland and Wales and be treated like them, rather than as a bit of the UK which was on the way to some other destination. Part of the problem was that the civil servants in the NIO had been intellectually captured by the Irish. Very few of them had any sympathy for the idea of the Union at all. New blood was needed.

The Prime Minister asked about the situation on the ground. Trimble said this was difficult to gauge, in the middle of a holiday period. Many of his party activists were hostile to negotiating with Sinn Fein. There was more public support for this, and even support from unexpected quarters like hardline members of the Portadown Orange Lodge. He added that the UUP Party Conference would be in the middle of October, which made developments before then sensitive.

The Prime Minister concluded that he would continue to work on the Irish. In particular, he hoped to get them to agree to describe consent as the guiding principle of the negotiations. He would also talk to Hume about the possible shape of a settlement. Trimble commented that consent as a central principle was more important than the fine print on decommissioning. But he did not think the Irish Government really wanted the present talks process to continue. Their

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underlying preference was to try to impose the Joint Framework Document over the heads of the parties.

Comment

This was the first meeting in my time at Downing Street which has actually discussed what a settlement might look like, rather than issues of process/participation. Trimble's idea of a settlement may be some way from what might succeed, but it was at least encouraging that he wanted to focus on a settlement and not on whether he should be talking to Sinn Fein or the details of decommissioning. In particular, the clear suggestion from Trimble that consent is more important than decommissioning is potentially very significant. It was agreed that the Prime Minister and Trimble should meet again towards the end of August, when both had returned from holiday.

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

Yin ee
John

JOHN HOLMES

K. Lindsay, Esq.,
Northern Ireland Office.

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