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From the Private Secretary

4 September 1997

SUBJECT
MASTER

Dee Richard,

Filed on:

**TELEPHONE CONVERSATION BETWEEN THE PRIME MINISTER
AND THE TAOISEACH, 4 SEPTEMBER**

Following receipt of the Taoiseach's letter, the Prime Minister spoke to the Taoiseach on the telephone this afternoon for some 15 minutes.

After initial exchange about the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, in which the Taoiseach sent his condolences and referred to the great outpouring of sorrow in Ireland too, the Prime Minister said that he would be blunt. There was not a hope of keeping Trimble in the talks on the basis set out in the Taoiseach's letter. There might not be too many problems over consent. But he saw real difficulties over decommissioning. He understood why Sinn Fein might be reluctant to agree to decommissioning, but they should not have an armlock on the process. If it was the case that Sinn Fein had no intention whatever of contemplating any decommissioning during the negotiations, irrespective of what happened in these negotiations, we had a real problem. He was not interested in setting up a new pre-condition, and certainly not in getting back into Washington 3 territory. He was ready to say that decommissioning was neither a pre-condition, nor an obligation. But it was vital to say that the two governments wanted to see actual decommissioning. Otherwise the Unionist argument that the two governments had in effect agreed that there should not be decommissioning during the negotiations would be vindicated. This would give him great difficulties, never mind Trimble. He believed that, once we were into negotiations, many things would become possible. But if it was clear at the outset that Sinn Fein had absolutely no intention of decommissioning, it would be hard not to conclude that Sinn Fein wanted to be able to go back to violence whenever it suited them.

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Ahern agreed that there should not be a problem on consent. The whole approach to the negotiations should be based on consent as a guiding principle. On decommissioning, he had been trying to set out the position of the Irish Government, which wanted decommissioning, but not as a pre-condition. The Irish formula made clear that they wanted to achieve through negotiations a complete and permanent decommissioning of paramilitary weapons. The reason he saw our language as a return to Washington 3 was because of the way Trimble would use it. He would say at some stage in the talks that the governments had wanted actual decommissioning and, since this was not happening, there obviously could be no progress in the political talks either. The Irish Government did want decommissioning to happen, and as soon as possible. It would be far better if it happened early on. But anything of this kind said by the two governments now would be jumped on by Trimble, just as Unionists had jumped on Washington 3.

The Prime Minister said he understood what the Taoiseach was saying, but his position was entirely different from that of the previous Government when they had become impaled on Washington 3. He had no problems with his majority. Great progress had also been made in the last couple of months. But we had reached the point where reasonable opinion in Britain might conclude that the Government was reneging on its position. He believed Trimble did want to be in the negotiations – although Adams' remarks in Washington had made this more difficult, no doubt deliberately. He would not himself allow a Washington 3 situation to develop. But he did need to have it made clear at the very beginning that, while decommissioning was not a pre-condition, and was not being made an obligation in negotiations, nevertheless the two governments did want to see it happen in accordance with Mitchell. The Prime Minister repeated that, if we did not say this, Trimble would be right that we had in fact agreed that there should not be any decommissioning. That would put the Government in a very difficult position. The Irish references to complete and permanent decommissioning avoided the issue of what happened during the negotiations. This had to be dealt with head on. If Trimble accepted the kind of wording the Prime Minister had in mind he would be accepting that it was not an obligation but would also be deprived of his argument that the Government had endorsed the idea of no decommissioning.

Ahern said that, as he understood it, the Prime Minister was saying that both governments would like to see decommissioning during the course of the negotiations. But if it did not happen, it would not be used as a pre-condition. In any case, the Prime Minister did not want to be in a position where he could

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be seen as not wanting decommissioning. The Prime Minister confirmed that this was a minimum requirement. It remained the case of course that he would not ask the Taoiseach to say anything unless it was clear that this would keep Trimble in the talks.

Ahern said that he would reflect on this, and look to see if the relevant paragraph could be switched around in some way. He had written most of the letter himself, but could see the Prime Minister's difficulty. He would try to get some language to us tonight. The Prime Minister welcomed this, and said that we would also look at some new wording. He wanted to resolve this very quickly.

The Prime Minister went on to the question of chairmanships. Our idea had been that de Chastelain would remain Chairman of Strand 2 but Mitchell would finish up as acting Chairman. Was the Taoiseach suggesting that de Chastelain could not figure in the Strand 2 frame at all?

Ahern said that he did not think de Chastelain could or should do both jobs. A mechanism which effectively excluded Mitchell would not be acceptable. The Prime Minister said that what we had in mind was effectively de Chastelain as de jure Chairman and Mitchell as de facto Chairman, even if these terms were not themselves used. Ahern said that if a satisfactory proposal on these lines could be worked up, and this would help Trimble off his hook, he would be prepared to look at it positively. The Prime Minister welcomed this and said that he would be prepared to make clear to Trimble as necessary that Mitchell would in fact be the acting Chairman.

Comment

The conversation concluded at this point. Although the Prime Minister was blunt, the tone was friendly throughout, and Ahern was placatory. We have now sent the attached revised language to the Irish. As you will see, it covers the key consent and decommissioning points only, in order not to confuse the issue at this stage. The Irish will no doubt reciprocate with further language of their own. Let us hope that there is some common ground between the two. The Prime Minister plans to speak to the Taoiseach again tomorrow to try to tie this down if at all possible.

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

Yours ever
John

JOHN HOLMES

Richard Lemon Esq
Northern Ireland Office

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