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From: John Holmes
Date: 8 September 1997

PRIME MINISTER

cc Jonathan Powell
~~Alastair Campbell~~

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NORTHERN IRELAND

1. A few thoughts in advance of Wednesday's meeting with Trimble.
2. The current position is as follows. The NIO experts are taking up with the Irish some detailed points in the language Ahern sent us on Friday. There is one important point on consent. The present sentence reads: "The two Governments remain fully committed to the consent principle as set out in the Downing Street Declaration, under which any change in the status of Northern Ireland would only come about with the consent of a majority of its people, and this will be a guiding principle for them in the negotiations, from which no outcome is of course excluded or predetermined.
3. The NIO point out that the underlined "would" comes from the Anglo-Irish Agreement, and that this formulation would not be seen as at all reassuring by the Unionists. They will argue today in an officials' meeting with the Irish for "should" (which makes it a real principle, rather than just a statement of fact). An alternative is to delete from "under which" to ".... its people". This may prove more acceptable to the Irish.
4. Two other developments: Hume is not standing for the Irish Presidency – not sure whether this is good news or not; and,

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IRA tensions over the ceasefire appear to be coming to a (temporary) head.

5. Meanwhile the talks formally resume tomorrow. There will be no Unionists there. The DUP and McCartney have already walked out, and the UUP cannot attend with Sinn Fein at least until their Executive Council meets on Saturday. The only real business will be Sinn Fein's acceptance of the Mitchell principles. As we have discussed, we need to play up their acceptance of democracy and non-violence and our intention to make them stick to it.
6. We need to decide on the tactics with Trimble on Wednesday. I think you will need to go for him hard, without giving him a chance to go through all his supposed grievances. Your basic argument is that there is a chance for a settlement in the next few months, on terms acceptable to Unionism, which he must not miss – the big picture. My guess is he will throw back in our face as inadequate the language we will have agreed with the Irish – your line must be that he needs to use it to justify what the broader Protestant population wants him to do, rather than constantly asking for more. We will of course have all the detailed arguments for you to use, but these will be less important in my view than putting him on the back foot straightaway.
7. The signals from Trimble and the UUP about their intentions remain mixed. Three of Trimble's MPs have already come out openly against staying in the talks, But Trimble has several options:
- (i) staying in the talks opposite Sinn Fein, agreeing to our decommissioning proposals, agreeing the agenda for the substantive talks, and embarking on them.

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- (ii) staying in the talks opposite Sinn Fein, but refusing to agree our decommissioning proposals and saying that he wants to talk to Sinn Fein about decommissioning, ie, in effect refusing to allow the talks to move on.
- (iii) as (ii), but allowing the talks to move on at least to discussion of the substantive agenda (through accepting a procedural motion bypassing decommissioning), although perhaps no further.
- (iv) staying out of the talks altogether, and in effect accepting a move to Plan B (bilateral talks, or at least variable geometry).
- (v) staying out of the talks and refusing to play with Plan B.

We obviously want (i), but this is the most difficult option for Trimble. He may well go for (ii), which would in some ways be the most difficult for us. If Trimble is clever, and is in theory in the talks, but in effect not letting them move on beyond decommissioning, he can portray himself as the injured party. Why are the Governments closing the talks when I have just agreed to stay in them, despite dissension in my party?

The point is that we (you) are absolutely committed to starting the substantive talks on 15 September. A delay of a day or two would hardly matter if Trimble was coming on board, but if Trimble is clearly not going to play ball, we will more or less have to say on 15 September that we are suspending the talks and moving to Plan B. This will obviously be high profile.

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It is also an outcome we must avoid if we can – hence the importance of persuading Trimble not only to stay in the talks but also to allow them to move on to the substance. One key argument, reflecting his own views, is that otherwise the rule of sufficient consensus, to which he attaches great importnace, will fall with the talks themselves.

All this to say that you will have to be very tough with Trimble on Wednesday, not just persuasive. He needs to understand his position will not be appreciated, or in any way supported, if he stays out now or blocks progress in the talks, however much he may proclaim injured innocence.

We should also mobilise others to push Trimble in the right direction, but there are not many I can think of with much influence: David Montgomery certainly, and perhaps Robin Eames. It might even be worth you having a word with Hague to get him on side before Trimble gets at him. I might also have a private word with Jeffrey Donaldson. ✓



JOHN HOLMES

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