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**FAXED**

to NIO. Lason + Robert  
FCO  
FERB. 15/9

From the Private Secretary

15 September 1997

*Dear Gen.*

# NORTHERN IRELAND: CONSENT AND DECOMMISSIONING

I have no intention of trying to record every twist and turn of the negotiations over the weekend, but I should record the main points of the understandings reached with Trimble and the Taoiseach.

We had reached agreement on Friday with Trimble and the Irish on the first half of the proposed statement, about consent. Following the UUP Executive Committee meeting on Saturday, at which Trimble got the freedom of manoeuvre for the leadership to decide which he had sought, discussions with him confirmed that the basic deal was still on. The Prime Minister and he agreed that we should aim to issue the Anglo-Irish statement early on Monday morning. He could then react to it favourably later in the day, and be in the talks the following day, with the aim of getting onto the substantive issues quickly thereafter. On the back of this, I sent him on Saturday evening the rest of the proposed text, on decommissioning, and the draft procedural motion for the talks.

Trimble responded quickly. He said that the text was broadly what he had expected, but he had difficulty with the last sentence, which seemed to him to suggest that the Mitchell compromise itself might be up for negotiation. I made clear that this was relatively easy to change (and consequently agreed a slightly different version of the last paragraph with the Irish). On the procedural motion, Trimble was not negative, but said that he would need more time, and would also need to discuss it with his colleagues. But he had three initial reservations:

- the UUP would want to give more thought to how to finesse decommissioning (but he was not suggesting this hurdle could not be surmounted);

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- they could not sign up to the past proposals on the substantive agenda, even though they were their own. A lot of things had happened since then, not least Sinn Fein's entry, and they needed to be rethought, including with the loyalists. Sinn Fein could "embarrass" the Unionists too easily otherwise;
- they had (unspecified) worries about the Business Committee meeting so quickly.

I urged him to give us more specific reactions on Sunday. Otherwise the Irish would be very reluctant to sign up to the text I had sent him. We all needed to be sure that we could get past the existing agenda hurdles quickly. I also checked that Trimble was not talking just of the UUP joining proximity talks. He confirmed this: media talk to the contrary was genuinely ill-informed speculation. But he was reluctant to be more specific about the procedural motion before Monday and said that, apart from talking to the loyalists, he would also want to go through this with Mitchell and others, including the Northern Ireland Office. He would for example want to discuss how the talks should be structured, and the IRA statement of last Thursday. But he confirmed that launching the three strands was his intention, hopefully by Wednesday but if not by Monday 22 September.

I passed all this on to Paddy Teahon later that evening (except for the reference to 22 September), and said that the next step would be for the Prime Minister to talk again to Trimble, to try to pin him down further on his intentions. Teahon reacted calmly, but reiterated Irish suspicions and desire to know what Trimble was going to do in detail, if possible in writing.

The Prime Minister spoke again to Trimble late on Sunday afternoon, to reinforce the point that the Irish wanted to know whether Trimble would come into the talks after the text was issued and what would happen then. Trimble repeated that his colleagues needed to look at the procedural motion. There were some wrinkles in it, although none of them were insuperable. They would want to "tweak" the wording on decommissioning. There was also a problem about the agenda for the substantive talks, which needed to be rethought in the new situation. He knew the Irish wanted to launch the three strands quickly and were suspicious, but they would have to make a leap of faith, as he was so often told to do by them. The UUP were going in to the talks, but he needed to talk to the Chairman and others about the procedural aspects and about the agenda.

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The Prime Minister, picking up a previous suggestion by Trimble, wondered whether the agenda point could be finally dealt with after the three strands had been launched. Trimble confirmed that he saw this as a possibility. If the governments could put out their text early on Monday, he would respond favourably in the course of the day, and be in the talks on Tuesday. Decommissioning could then be sorted out quickly, with a slightly different form of words (although he could not yet give us this). The three strands could then be launched perhaps even on Tuesday or Wednesday, with the agenda being sorted out subsequently – the procedural motion would of course need to deal with this. There was also some nervousness about the Business and Liaison Committees and too rapid direct contact with Sinn Fein in these bodies. But if the Irish did not go ahead with the proposed statement, he would have real problems.

The Prime Minister summed up the sequence of events: Anglo-Irish text, favourable UUP response, decommissioning wording sorted out, and the three strands launched. Trimble confirmed this, but reiterated the need for the procedural motion to have a form of words on the agenda. There would be a lot to talk about once the UUP were in the talks.

The discussion went round this circle several times, with the Prime Minister trying to pin down Trimble as far as possible and Trimble avoiding being too specific while confirming that, as long as the Irish delivered, so would he. The conversation concluded with a brief discussion about presentation of the Anglo-Irish text as clarification of the two governments' views in the context of the resumption of the talks.

The Prime Minister then spoke to the Taoiseach, to explain where he had got to with Trimble – the latter would respond favourably to the Anglo-Irish text and turn up to the talks on Tuesday; Decommissioning could be sorted out quickly, although there were difficulties about the substantive agenda. The Prime Minister thought there was now a sufficient basis to go ahead with the statement. He had made it clear to Trimble what was expected of him, and that if he did not deliver, relations in future would be very difficult. His judgement was that Trimble would come into the talks and deliver, although Trimble was certainly difficult to deal with, and there could be no absolute guarantee.

Ahern said that Trimble was within his rights to want to talk further about the agenda. If the Prime Minister was saying Trimble would deliver, that was

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good enough for him. But if in the event the process went two steps forward then three steps backwards, he would go straight back to the consent principle as originally defined by the Irish.

The Prime Minister commented on the extra difficulty caused by the IRA statement of last Thursday. But the Taoiseach's rapid statement had been good. Ahern said that he had reacted strongly and made his concern clear personally to Adams, in addition to his public statement. On the procedural motion, he did not mind what changes Trimble made, as long as it was clear that the initial plenary agenda was behind us. Otherwise Paisley and McCartney would come back in and argue on legal grounds that the plenary should still be open, with for example decommissioning still on the agenda.

The Prime Minister said he entirely agreed. The key was to put all the endless bickering about procedure behind us and launch the three strands. Ahern asked why the details of the procedural motion could not be sorted out that evening before the statement was issued. The Prime Minister said this was unlikely to be possible, as Trimble could not consult others before the following morning. But he had been clear that he saw no real problems with it. It would be good to get the statement out first thing in the morning.

Ahern continued to press on tying down the procedural motion. He wanted to be sure it would clearly end the saga of the opening agenda. Could Trimble be spoken to again? The Prime Minister said that was his desire and his understanding of Trimble's position. But he did not think the words of the procedural motion could be tied down further that evening, although he would try to talk to Trimble again. He assured the Taoiseach that he did not think he would finish up with egg on his face.

Ahern agreed on this basis, and said he would talk to Ray Burke before he saw Dr Mowlam the following morning.

Subsequently Teahon spoke to me to try again to tie down the procedural motion that evening. I repeated that this would not be possible, and stressed the importance for Trimble's strategy of the joint statement going out early the following morning. Teahon eventually agreed, as long as the Prime Minister could assure the Taoiseach that Trimble was in principle signed up to a procedural motion which would bring the opening agenda to a clear conclusion.

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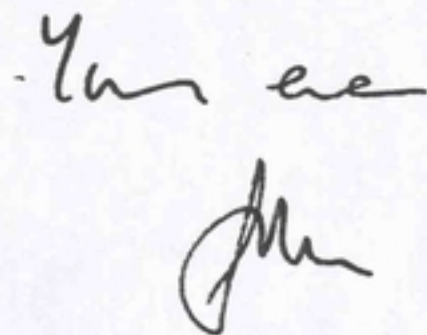
The Prime Minister tried to speak to Trimble again to pin this down but he proved untraceable. Nevertheless, after talking to the Prime Minister again, I gave Teahon the assurance he had asked for. It was agreed that the statement should go ahead on that basis. I spoke to Trimble again this morning to make clear that the Prime Minister had given the Taoiseach this assurance. Trimble saw no difficulty about this, as long as the Irish were ready to discuss the agenda further (as I assured him they were). But he remained grudging, to say the least, about what the Irish had done. He will not be looking to do them any particular favours.

Comment

This was all hard going, and we will have to continue to work hard to keep Trimble to what he has told us. The Prime Minister believes that Trimble will cause problems but cannot now back away from joining the talks and allowing them to move on without great damage to his own position.

One lesson from the whole exercise is that the UUP can be brought along better, albeit still with difficulty, if they feel consulted and have the chance to comment on texts in draft. The psychological importance for them of not being presented with faits accomplis is hard to over-estimate.

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



JOHN HOLMES

Ken Lindsay Esq  
Northern Ireland Office

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