

CONFIDENTIAL

file

From: John Holmes

Date: 18 July 1997

PRIME MINISTER

CC Jonathan Powell
Alastair Campbell

NORTHERN IRELAND

As I write, the IRA ceasefire has not yet been announced, but it is only a matter of time. As we have discussed, it is good news. But it is clear from the intelligence that it is very much a tactical ceasefire, which can be abandoned at any time. The trick is to turn it into a permanent end to violence if we can – there has always been a school of thought that the IRA would find it very hard to go back to violence a second time. I subscribe to that up to a point, but only up to a point. A lot of IRA preparatory activity (and punishment beatings etc.) is likely to continue. This will complicate our judgement on Sinn Fein's invitation to join the talks. The Unionists will not be slow to point up the problems.

There will be all sorts of questions in the coming days about supposedly secret deals we have struck with the IRA, and about why we are not insisting a new ceasefire must be permanent, after last time. We will have to talk our way through all this as best we can. Most people will just be glad to see another ceasefire, so public opinion will be with us.

I have spoken to Trimble to encourage him to be restrained in his comments. He was suspicious about deals but OK. I have also talked to the Americans. They are in danger of being over-euphoric, so I have tried to calm them down. They have already raised the question of US visas for Sinn Fein. I said we would not

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

- 2 -

make a fuss about the principle but would not expect to see Gerry Adams feted on the White House lawn as a peacemaker either. I think they took the point.

Our big problem now is obviously Trimble and decommissioning. The ceasefire does not really make this much better. I attach the NIO analysis (not seen by Mo). As you will see, there is a strong flavour of urging us to call Trimble's bluff, and risk the collapse of the talks, and a hankering after Plan B. We may finish up there, but we must go the extra mile for the Unionists, just as we did for Sinn Fein. I am very doubtful in particular about threatening the Unionists with loss of the Forum. The nationalists don't really care about the Forum (and don't attend).

There are some possible formulations in the NIO letter, but I am not very impressed by them. How about the following selection:

- The two governments want to see actual decommissioning of all paramilitaries begin as soon as possible and clearly envisage this happening during the negotiations, as suggested by the Mitchell Report.
- The two governments' efforts will be directed towards actual decommissioning beginning during the negotiations, as envisaged by the Mitchell Report. They recognise that this depends on the cooperation of the paramilitary organisations themselves but believe that action of this kind will be an important part of confidence-building.
- The two governments accept that actual decommissioning cannot at the end of the day be achieved other than through the cooperation of the

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

- 3 -

paramilitary organisations themselves. But they believe that it will have a crucial part to play in building the confidence necessary for success in the political negotiations, and will want to see it begin as soon as possible.

- The two governments are keen to see actual decommissioning as soon as possible, as part of the achievement both of the Mitchell principles and the Mitchell report. That will be their aim, to ensure confidence can be built during the negotiations.

There are obviously many variations on this basic theme. As you said to the Taoiseach, none of these may be enough to secure Trimble's vote next Wednesday. But at least we will be seen to have tried. One extra point we should bear in mind: Trimble will hate being faced next week with something we have again agreed with the Irish, which he cannot change. This is one of his main complaints. But I am not sure I see any way round it. Any formula we try on him in advance he is bound to reject as inadequate. Success will lie in the combination of something to offer him, and a further strong appeal to him to stay in the process now that a ceasefire can help create a new atmosphere.

Two further thoughts:

- We should keep in mind possible use of Mitchell, despite the NIO's doubts. He would not give his interpretation unless both governments requested it. But we might ask the Irish to do this with us if we cannot agree any language – it could be easier for the Irish if Mitchell does it.

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

- 4 -

- The Americans could be helpful, for example by telling Trimble that they believe there should be some decommissioning during negotiations, and will be pressing for it.

On procedure, as I said, the Irish may be more amenable once the ceasefire is in the bag. Perhaps we can then compare notes on possible formulations, and I could send some to my Irish opposite number. We will no doubt be in touch several times over the weekend! NB I am supposed to be playing my first cricket match of the season tomorrow - I hope to stick to this, but may not be able to - if I do I will obviously be fully contactable and will keep in close touch.

NB also on meetings: we had fixed Trimble for Monday lunch time but Mo wants to be in the talks then, so we may go for early Tuesday morning instead. We also have a big problem with Paisley, who has been demanding a meeting for weeks, to at least start to match Trimble's easy access. He scarcely deserves it - he spends all his time denouncing the government - but is threatening dire consequences for the talks if he does not meet you before Wednesday's vote (we had offered him a meeting the following week but he has rejected this). Any views?



JOHN HOLMES