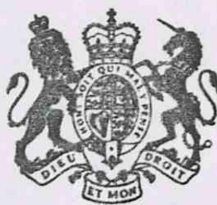


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FILE

SUBJECT
MASTER10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA

Filed on:

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From the Private Secretary

18 July 1997

Dear Idun,

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Prime Minister and the Taoiseach spoke on the telephone this afternoon for some 15 minutes. Ahern said that, as the Prime Minister would no doubt have seen, things were moving quickly on the Sinn Fein side. Adams and Maginnis were going to ask the IRA to restore the August 1994 ceasefire. They would be talking to the IRA this evening, and he expected a rapid response. He hoped all would be in order by tomorrow, or perhaps Sunday.

The Prime Minister said this was very good news, but he wondered what the IRA would say. Would they attach conditions? Ahern said that there would be no conditions. It would be on the basis that had always been envisaged, i.e., that we would be moving to meaningful and conclusive negotiations, without pre-conditions, with a time frame, on the basis of equality, with no outcome predetermined in advance, a comprehensive agenda, decommissioning not allowed to block the negotiations, and action on confidence-building measures. The obvious question was whether the violence was really finished. He certainly hoped so. He thought it would be an unequivocal ceasefire.

The Prime Minister repeated that this was very good news. Meanwhile, he had been talking to the UUP, as Ahern would know. It was very important that the IRA did not say that they would not decommission any weapons. If they threw down this kind of gauntlet to the UUP, we might lose the UUP from the process altogether. He had had a very difficult meeting with Trimble, and would probably meet him again early next week. Trimble was insisting that there must be some actual decommissioning. We had said this was our view, but we could not force it to happen.

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The Prime Minister went on that he saw three possible positions on decommissioning:

- (i) There must be decommissioning;
- (ii) Decommissioning was not going to happen in reality;
- (iii) We wanted decommissioning, and intended/envisaged that this should happen, but we could not compel it.

Anything less than (iii) would pose great problems, and even this might not be enough for Trimble. He was under great pressure, and had hardened up his position. We had thought that if it was clear that a scheme would be in place by the time talks started, that would be enough. But he had now fastened on the question of whether "considering" decommissioning meant that there should be some decommissioning or not. The Prime Minister had always believed himself that this issue would be easier to deal with once the talks had begun. But it was surely impossible to say now that we did not envisage any decommissioning taking place during the talks. This would be to make a nonsense of what Mitchell said. He understood the need not to alarm Sinn Fein. Equally, we had to be careful not to lose the Unionists off the other side.

Ahern said that he did not wish this to happen. He had always called for inclusive talks. This meant including the Unionists as well as Sinn Fein. Plan B was all very well, but the current process would be much better. But Trimble had the Mitchell report to point to. He also had the proposals of the two Governments, and lengthy clarification. There was a lot there for him. He (Ahern) could not say that decommissioning must happen, or that Sinn Fein would be expelled from the talks if it did not. But he would certainly make clear once the talks were under way that confidence had to be built.

The Prime Minister said that he believed the issue was, for Trimble, more tactical than real. Trimble did not necessarily believe that decommissioning was essential, but he had to have some words he could point to to defend himself. Perhaps the British Government could make a statement which the Irish would not object to. Or, better, the two Governments could say something together to deal with Trimble's tactical problem.

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Ahern said that if the word experts could find the right formulation, he would not object. He could not however go back on what had been said already. He repeated that he did want inclusive talks, including the Unionists too.

The Prime Minister repeated that it was very important that Sinn Fein did not make a big issue of decommissioning and emphasise that no guns would be surrendered. This would make life very difficult. Ahern said that he would try to get this message to Sinn Fein through the various intermediaries they had. All the Sinn Fein statement said was that decommissioning should not block the negotiations.

The Prime Minister repeated that he wanted to give Trimble enough to protect him against the accusations of betrayal that he feared. Trimble had also made much in his meeting yesterday of fears that INLA would go on with violence, with the tacit approval of the IRA. Ahern said that he did not believe this would be the case. He expected the IRA to declare their ceasefire very quickly. He believed it would be definitively the end of violence.

The Prime Minister concluded that he would keep in touch with the Taoiseach. Meanwhile, he would try to think through his strategy for dealing with Trimble, and some words that could be used. He hoped the Taoiseach would reflect on this too. Ahern agreed, and repeated that he wanted the talks to be genuinely inclusive.

Comment: This was a helpful conversation, with Ahern showing more flexibility than might have been expected, given the exchanges with Ray Burke this morning. It remains to be seen whether this flexibility extends to actual formulations. We must put this to the test: we discussed the need to have various formulations to hand, and the possibility that the Irish would be more flexible once the ceasefire was in the bag.

I should add that Trimble rang me shortly after this conversation. He asked whether we had known a ceasefire was about to be declared (obviously suspicious it had all been pre-negotiated). I said that we had not, although we had begun to pick up echoes before the public statements. Trimble said that Adams's statement appeared to refer to assurances he had received from HMG in terms which went beyond the things he had seen. I assured him that all the clarifications/assurances we had given to Sinn Fein were contained in the aide-memoire and the 9 July letter. Trimble referred suspiciously to the telephone conversations. I assured him that nothing different had been said during these

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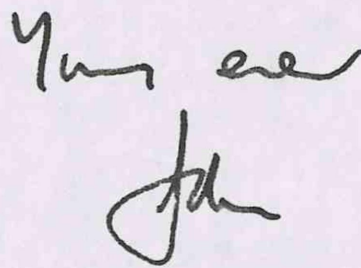
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conversations. Indeed, they had been less detailed and gone less far than what had appeared in writing. Trimble also referred suspiciously to what Burke had said at lunchtime in London about honouring all the assurances given to Sinn Fein. I said that I could not vouch for what the Irish might have promised Sinn Fein. I was not aware of any such promises, but could not swear that they did not exist. Trimble said that he would try to keep his comments about the ceasefire restrained, at least in comparison with what the DUP and McCartney were likely to say. I encouraged him to do so, and said that our attitude would be one of cautious welcome. We left it at that, on a reasonably friendly note.

I have also spoken to Sandy Berger, who was delighted and offered congratulations. I explained where we were with the Unionists and took him through the decommissioning issue (which he did not understand). His off-the-cuff response was that our position was entirely reasonable. He said that the Americans would be under rapid pressure to give Sinn Fein visas. I said I did not expect us to make a fuss about this, but I advised a cautious, graduated response. Fêting Adams on the White House lawn as a peacemaker would not go down well, particularly as we would only be getting a tactical ceasefire. Berger assured me the Americans would not do this. He said they were ready to help with the Unionists if we wanted them to. (Bill Crowe told me later that he was also urging caution on the White House, who were in danger of excessive euphoria.)

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) by fax.



JOHN HOLMES

John McKervill, Esq.,
Northern Ireland Office.

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