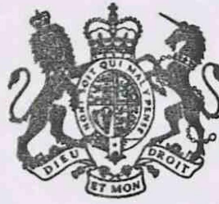


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10 DOWNING STREET
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File FCU
cc DEH
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From the Private Secretary

21 July 1997

Dear Sir,

NORTHERN IRELAND

It may be helpful if I summarise the main toings and froings on 20 July.

The Prime Minister spoke to the Taoiseach around lunchtime, and explained again the difficulties we were having with the Unionists over decommissioning. The Taoiseach said that he had been trying in all his public interviews to play up points of interest to the Unionists, e.g. the consent principle and possible change to the Irish constitution. The Prime Minister said he would be telling Trimble that he could not reopen the joint proposals or deliver a joint statement saying there "must" be decommissioning or Sinn Fein would be expelled. But he would like to be able to say that a proper decommissioning scheme should be in place by 15 September, and that the two governments envisaged some actual decommissioning taking place during the talks. We would send the Irish some suggested words on these lines.

Ahern said he would look at the words we sent and try to be as accommodating as he could, without going back on promises already made. But he was not sure Trimble was really interested in finding a way to stay in the talks. The Prime Minister said this was unclear. Trimble was certainly under great pressure, but probably did not want to jump overboard if he could help it. It was possible to move to a period of bilateral discussions but it was very unclear whether the Unionists would cooperate, and renewed Loyalist violence was a real possibility. He hoped the Taoiseach could look carefully at the words we sent. It was also possible that we could get them blessed by Mitchell.

Ahern said he had passed back to Sinn Fein the Prime Minister's message about their words on decommissioning. He thought Sinn Fein had played ball so far. The Prime Minister said it would also be helpful if they could go a bit slower over access to Castle Buildings and meetings. Ahern took the point. He did not propose to meet Adams himself until Thursday evening or Friday morning.

The Prime Minister asked whether Sinn Fein could ever move on the consent principle. Ahern said they had refused to do so at the Dublin Forum, but they had

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not said never. They were bound to go on pressing for a united Ireland (as were the Irish government), but they might be prepared to accept the consent principle in substantive talks. The Prime Minister commented that he had told Trimble 18 months ago that consent was more important than decommissioning. Trimble had seemed to agree. Ahern commented that the Irish position was to support referendums, North and South.

It was agreed that the two should speak again after the Taoiseach had seen our words and the Prime Minister had spoken by phone to Trimble. I subsequently sent Teahon the attached fax. The Prime Minister and Taoiseach are due to speak again around 1000 this morning.

The Prime Minister spoke later by phone to Trimble (to enable a conversation without Trimble's minders present). The Prime Minister said the situation was difficult, and we did not see an easy way through. But he wanted to emphasise that the British position on decommissioning had not in fact changed at all. He still hoped to persuade the Irish Government to agree to joint words supporting actual decommissioning. We could also say ourselves that, if it became clear in the talks that there would be no actual decommissioning, this would create a very serious situation.

Trimble said that the joint proposals were not good enough – they created no real pressure for decommissioning, since there was no sanction on Sinn Fein. He could not go into talks with Sinn Fein on that basis. He would be committing political suicide. He had been led up the garden path by the NIO (etc). The Unionists had been kicked in the teeth so often that he had no room for manoeuvre at all. He might have been able to accept something along the lines proposed by the Prime Minister last week, but not now that Sinn Fein would definitely be in the talks.

The Prime Minister said that the only real kick in the teeth for the Unionists would be if they were betrayed on the substance of the issue. There was no chance of that, although he was prepared to go a long way to get people to the talks. Trimble said there were too many fears over the substance too. In any case he could not support the proposals, though he did not want to walk out either. He might have to if Sinn Fein were let into Castle Buildings too soon, and Dr Mowlam met Adams this week, as the TV said. He wanted to stay in touch with the process but it was very difficult. He knew some people were trying to drive him out.

The Prime Minister said Sinn Fein's participation in the talks was not guaranteed. There was still a serious decision to take. In any case, would the Unionist community be happy to see the talks collapse? Did the attitude of people

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like Peter Robinson impress others? Trimble said that it did find an echo in Northern Ireland. His own restraint was getting him into trouble. So there was bound to be a problem on Wednesday. But he would not withdraw from the talks and hoped they would not be suspended.

The Prime Minister wondered how an impasse on Wednesday could be handled to best advantage. It would depend on whether it was a failure to agree, with a willingness to go on talking, or a total stand-off. He did not want to go into purely bilateral discussions and it would be bad if the talks collapsed effectively at the Unionist initiative. The UUP needed an exit strategy. The prize for the UUP and Trimble at the end of the day was a large say in running Northern Ireland.

Trimble seemed to see the logic of this. He needed some positive things to do and say, and some way of building confidence. But he advised the Prime Minister not to waste political capital on persuading the Irish to do what he had suggested. It would not be enough for him anyway. Nevertheless, he would try to keep some options open. For example he would not rule out talking to Sinn Fein under any circumstances, unlike Paisley and McCartney.

(Comment: Trimble was not in angry mode during this conversation but more resigned to the pressure he was under to take a negative line. The Prime Minister was inclined to wonder afterwards whether, having signalled his unwillingness to cave in to government pressure in the vote on Wednesday, he might be more amenable thereafter, if the talks could somehow be kept in being for long enough.)

The Prime Minister also spoke briefly to John Hume in the evening, Hume having telephoned earlier to express his appreciation of the Prime Minister's role. Hume said there was now a tremendously positive atmosphere on the ground in Northern Ireland (comment: unlike most other observers). He thought Sinn Fein were serious about giving up violence and finding a peaceful accommodation. The Prime Minister mentioned the Unionist difficulties over decommissioning, and the likelihood that they would not vote for the two governments' proposals on Wednesday. Hume was scornful – decommissioning wasn't even a word in the dictionary, and had never happened as the Unionists wanted anywhere else in the world (etc). Mitchell had proposed the obvious way out. He did not know whether the IRA would be ready to disarm during the negotiations – his own impression was that they would eventually get rid of their own weapons themselves, as the official IRA had done.

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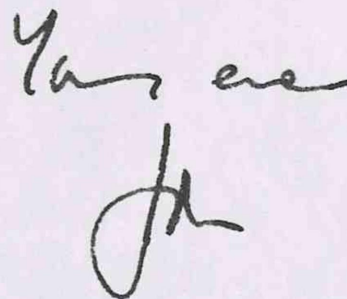
The Prime Minister said he hoped that pressure from the people of Northern Ireland would have a beneficial effect on both sides. But he feared great difficulties with the Unionists.

I followed up this conversation with Hume later to urge him to urge Sinn Fein to be sensible and restrained in their demands about access to Castle Buildings and meetings. Otherwise they risked being totally counter-productive. Hume said he would talk to Adams. He rang back later to say he had done so. Sinn Fein were not being "heavy" in their demands. They just wanted two or three officials to look at the offices. I said this would not pose a problem, as long as they were not looking to grandstand.

I had earlier urged the same message on Paddy Teahon, and asked Anthony Cary (Washington Embassy) to use a similar line with Irish Americans who were stirring things up at Sinn Fein's behest, claiming that we were already behaving like the previous government during the last ceasefire (!). I should add that Senator Edward Kennedy tried to ring the Prime Minister in the course of Sunday but the Prime Minister was not able to return his call (or particularly enthusiastic about doing so).

The Prime Minister also spoke to Dr Mowlam on Sunday evening about the way forward. She hoped to provide rapid advice on the options if the vote on Wednesday was not positive. The Prime Minister made clear he was not keen to move to plan B unless this became absolutely unavoidable. It would be better to keep the talks in being if this could be managed.

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

**JOHN HOLMES**

John McKervill Esq
Northern Ireland Office

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