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FROM: THE PRIVATE SECRETARY

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*File
June 18.*

John Holmes Esq
Private Secretary
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21 July 1997

Dear John,

HANDLING THE UUP AND THE NEXT STEPS IN THE TALKS

My Secretary of State has been reflecting on the Prime Minister's meeting with the UUP this afternoon and the implications for the next stages in the Talks.

Her own view, drawing both on the meeting and on watching Trimble in the subsequent Press Conference, is that the UUP want to stay in the political process but will keep their options open until September. She is very doubtful whether there is anything we can achieve which will secure a positive UUP vote for the two Governments' Decommissioning Paper on Wednesday 23 July. She regards it as highly significant that Trimble declined to give a commitment that he would support the paper even if we met all six items on his wish list.

Against that background, the Secretary of State does not believe we should expend too much effort in trying to meet the UUP's wish list at this stage. She believes our main effort should occur in the run up to the resumption of Talks in September. At that point it will be important to do what we can to discover the best means of keeping the UUP in the process and accordingly of influencing the attitude of the Irish Government in the right direction.

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Meanwhile she believes it would be a mistake to lose any credit with the Irish Government or others in what she thinks is a fruitless effort to win UUP support for the paper. It is more important that we demonstrate fidelity to agreed positions with the Irish Government, and consistency with what we have said to others.

Having said that, she believes we should continue our efforts to secure Irish Government agreement to some more advanced form of words making it clear that we are seeking actual decommissioning alongside progress in the political negotiations. It is good that the Taoiseach has agreed to look for a better form of words. Although this is very unlikely on its own to bring Trimble round at this stage, it would in any case be an important defensive buttress to our own position. (There is a case, nonetheless, for reserving such a formula to September when it may take more tricks with the UUP.)

As to the handling of the next stages of the Talks, the Secretary of State believes that we should:

Proceed to the vote on the 23 July. Indeed the Secretary of State notes that it is unlikely that we could avoid this, since the timetable was agreed by the Talks participants by sufficient consensus and it is unlikely that we could secure sufficient consensus to delay the vote. We have not however definitely ruled out the possibility of being able to persuade the Irish and SDLP to defer a vote to early September, provided both Governments emphasise their determination to launch the 3 stranded talks on 15 September (Mr Murphy will have a chance to test Irish Ministers' views on this tonight.)

- However, on the assumption that the vote is taken and lost, we should encourage the Chairman to exercise his discretion, if he can secure agreement to it, to move on to

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complete the remaining work of the Opening Plenary by 29 July. Whether or not he succeeds there should then be an adjournment until 15 September; if he does not succeed there should be an immediate adjournment to the same date.

- The two Governments would emphasise their continued determination that substantive Talks would begin on 15 September.
- In the meantime both Governments would move to appoint the Independent Commission on Decommissioning, and to take the other necessary preparatory steps. We hope we could bring the Irish Government to agree to this, though they may take some persuading.
- On 15 September we would reconvene in the Talks process, and Sinn Féin, if they had by then been invited to join the process, would make their total and absolute commitment to the six Mitchell principles of democracy and non-violence.
- How we proceeded thereafter would depend crucially on what the UUP's attitude was. We could attempt to launch the three substantive Strands, with the UUP's grudging acquiescence in the two Governments' decommissioning approach; we could, with any additional reassurances we have by then engineered, have a further vote on our decommissioning proposals; or, if necessary, we could divert to Plan B.
- My Secretary of State does not believe it necessary to decide that now.
- There would be no need to bring the Forum to an end this side of September.

My Secretary of State believes accordingly that we should have ready a statement, whether HMG alone or by the two Governments together, in response to the loss of the vote on

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Wednesday. This might be needed on Wednesday or, if there is an adjournment for reflection, next week. This would emphasise that the process remains in being; that it would adjourn shortly, perhaps after completing the rest of the work on the Opening Plenary (if that option is viable); but that the two Governments will be putting in place the Independent Commission and taking the other necessary steps to pave the way for decommissioning; that the Talks will resume in September; that both Governments remain determined that substantive Talks should begin on 15 September; and that HMG will look at options and alternatives in preparation for September during the summer.

My Secretary of State notes that the consultations the UUP have announced with the wider community in Northern Ireland could be designed either to produce a negative result, or to increase Trimble's room for manoeuvre in September. In any event she thinks it prudent to take steps to ensure that there may be other tests of public opinion. She will consider how to carry that forward.

My Secretary of State will carry forward the tactical management of the Talks process on this basis, unless the Prime Minister suggests a different course of action.

I am sending a copy of this to Sir Robin Butler.

Yours ever
J. McKervill
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