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From the Private Secretary

22 July 1997

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 OF THE PUBLIC RECORDS ACT

Dear John,

NORTHERN IRELAND

I should bring the story of discussions with the Irish up to date. The Taoiseach's office continued to avoid speaking to me until around 1030 this morning. They then said that the Taoiseach was in Cabinet and would not be available until lunchtime. But Paddy Teahon made clear that their objection to use of the word "actual" before decommissioning remained, and that even the reference to "real progress on decommissioning" was causing problems with those they were consulting (ie Sinn Fein).

Dr Mowlam meanwhile was told by Donaldson that the UUP would much prefer to vote against the decommissioning proposals tomorrow, and then look at what they might need to change their position on a longer timescale. The Prime Minister therefore spoke to Trimble again on the telephone. He said that he had been making some progress with the Irish government on the concerns which Trimble had raised the previous day. But the Irish were obviously concerned that they might make moves in our direction, but find that these did not have any effect on the UUP's position. The Prime Minister therefore asked where the UUP now stood.

Trimble said that they were likely to vote against the proposals. If the Irish government agreed to substantial changes, they might be forced to vote for them. But he would be very reluctant to do so at this stage. He would be hung out to dry in Northern Ireland for 7 weeks, under attack for having agreed to talk to Sinn Fein on an inadequate basis. He was already being denounced on all sides, and any violent events on the ground would make his position even more difficult. The only circumstances where he might be able to move towards us

CONFIDENTIAL

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PREM 49/113 Letter dated 22 JULY 1997

CONFIDENTIAL

- 2 -

was in September, when he could perhaps say that while he hated having to stay in the talks with Sinn Fein, he would nevertheless have to do so in order to hold their feet to the fire over decommissioning and consent, since neither government was going to do that. It would be easier for him to do that just before the talks restarted than now.

The Prime Minister said that he had been looking at how he could respond to the concerns Trimble had raised. He thought he might be able to go quite a long way to meet most of them. He was trying to get the Irish to say that, although decommissioning depended on the cooperation of the paramilitary organisations, both governments wanted to see progress on actual, or actual, decommissioning during negotiations. He also hoped to achieve some useful wording on the consent principle. But he had to say that he had not yet got the Irish to the sticking point on decommissioning. The Irish concern was not to create a lever over decommissioning which could be used to block the substantive negotiations. He was prepared to go on working on the Irish, but it would be useful to know when any concessions would be most helpful to the UUP.

Trimble said that they would be best just before he was going to make his move. It was also very important for him to know where HMG would be, if he was going to hold Sinn Fein's feet to the fire on decommissioning and consent. He would also like to know more clearly where the talks were likely to go in the end. He would appreciate a chance to talk to the Prime Minister about this at some length privately soon.

It was agreed that the Prime Minister would send Trimble a draft of a letter from him, addressing his concerns, so that Trimble could see the direction of our thinking. The two could then meet on Tuesday or Wednesday next week away from the glare of the cameras. It was also agreed that we should coordinate over presentation of the vote tomorrow, to ensure that the message got across that, although current attempts to resolve the difficulties had not succeeded, efforts would go on over the summer. (Alastair Campbell subsequently spoke to Trimble about this.) Trimble concluded that he hoped there would be no more nasty surprises like finding Sinn Fein allowed in to Castle Buildings first thing on Monday morning. This had made life very difficult, not least in (for example) getting in to see Mitchell. The Prime Minister said that Dr Mowlam would not be meeting Gerry Adams this week.

The Prime Minister eventually spoke to the Taoiseach at 1330. He explained that he had been trying to find a way out of the current impasse with

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

- 3 -

Trimble. It was now clear that Trimble would vote against the proposals tomorrow but would not walk out of the talks. He had also given a hint that he might be more amenable at a later stage. It was not entirely clear what he would need to accept the decommissioning proposals at a later stage, but a reference to actual decommissioning was likely to be a minimum requirement. He had told Trimble that saying there must be decommissioning was not negotiable, and explained fears that this would be used as a lever. But he feared that if the two governments could not at least say that they wanted to see actual decommissioning, Trimble would be lost altogether.

Ahern said that the Irish had difficulty in going even as far as the language they had sent to us the previous night. Trimble had had endless clarification and was still demanding more. Meanwhile, he was making clear publicly that he wanted a situation where, if decommissioning was not happening, Sinn Fein would have to leave the talks. The Irish had pushed Sinn Fein to come into the talks on the basis of the joint proposals and the agreed clarification. From their latest soundings of Sinn Fein, it was clear that even a reference to "real progress" would pose problems. Trimble would certainly interpret a reference to actual decommissioning as giving him the right to demand Sinn Fein's expulsion if it did not happen.

The Prime Minister said that our proposed text did not say this. But Trimble needed to have something positive to point to. Meanwhile we were beginning to have trouble ourselves in the right wing press, who were suggesting that we had agreed that there would be no decommissioning at all. There was a real problem if we could not say that we wanted to see actual decommissioning, although we accepted its voluntary nature. Sinn Fein could surely say that they did not accept there was an obligation on them to decommission, although there was an obligation to consider decommissioning.

Ahern wondered again whether even wording along the lines we had suggested would bring in Trimble. He could not go back on what he had said to Sinn Fein. But if wording on these lines would help to bring Trimble in, he was prepared to go back to Adams again.

The Prime Minister said that this was reasonable. He could not honestly answer the Taoiseach's question at this stage. But he had told Trimble he would not push the Taoiseach unless it was clear this would make a real difference. He suggested that he would come back to the Taoiseach if it became clear that Trimble would be able to do a deal in the future on this kind of basis. Ahern

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

- 4 -

agreed that, if Trimble was in that position, and the wording did not exclude the voluntary basis of decommissioning, he would be prepared to go back to Adams, and also to Hume, on this basis. Meanwhile, if the vote did not go through, it would be sensible not to criticise Trimble too much.

The Prime Minister agreed. Trimble had told him that he had no room for manoeuvre at present, because everyone was on his back, but things might be easier in a few weeks time. If at that point he could say he had got something out of the two governments, this might be enough for him. The Prime Minister repeated that he himself wanted to stay in all-party talks mode, even if much of the actual business had to be done bilaterally.

Ahern commented that, just as it might be easier for Trimble to move later, so it might be easier for him to extract new wording from Sinn Fein and Hume in a few weeks time. The Prime Minister accepted this. He would not try to go firm on language with Trimble now, but would at least try to establish what kind of language might be acceptable to Trimble.

Ahern suggested that, when the Prime Minister spoke to Trimble again, he should ask him to look back at what Ray Burke had said to him in a bilateral or trilateral meeting last week. Burke had gone a long way in saying how the Irish actually saw decommissioning developing. This should give Trimble a picture of where the Irish were, even if they could not write down this kind of thing formally. But he could understand the difficulties of Trimble's position, not least after the latest Orange Order decision.

The Prime Minister said that we hoped to get some voices out on the other side in Northern Ireland, eg from the business community. Meanwhile, even if the vote did not go through, it was important to continue with implementation of the Independent Commission etc. Ahern seemed to agree. He was happy that we were not seeking to postpone the vote, since this would have given the impression that the decommissioning argument could drag on endlessly. He would be making a speech himself at the end of the week, which he would try to make as balanced as possible.

In conclusion, the Prime Minister repeated that he would try to find out from Trimble where his bottom line really was. He could then tell the Taoiseach whether it was worth him trying to get new language on actual decommissioning. Ahern agreed. He would tell the Prime Minister straight if what was being asked was not on.

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

- 5 -

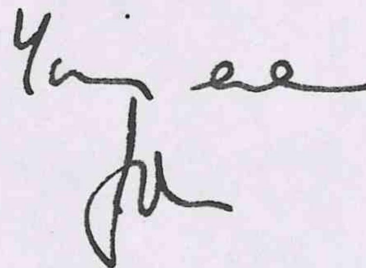
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The above leaves us with a reasonably clear game plan, in line with your letter to me of 21 July. After the vote tomorrow, which we will presumably lose, we should make clear that the search for agreement will continue, including in September when the talks resume, but that in any case substantive negotiations in one form or another will begin then. There may be a chance of doing a deal with Trimble and the Irish to keep the all-party talks in being, even if much of the real business may still be done in bilaterals. We will be in touch with Trimble to arrange a private meeting with him next week.

Meanwhile I would be grateful for rapid comments overnight on the attached draft letter to Trimble, which the Prime Minister has drafted and would like to send him in draft before he sees him, to give him an indication of what might be possible. I should say that the Prime Minister is attached to the formulation about failure to decommission meaning a breach of the Mitchell principles - it does not of course say anything about the point at which this failure is to be judged. We would make clear to Trimble in a covering letter that the proposed joint words with the Irish on decommissioning and consent are not agreed.

The Prime Minister is also keen to keep up pressure on Sinn Fein. One possibility is to ask them for clarification of their position on exclusively peaceful means and the unacceptability of force or the threat of force in democratic negotiations.

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



JOHN HOLMES

John McKervill, Esq.,
Northern Ireland Office.

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