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THE PRIME MINISTER

CONFIDENTIAL

DRAFT

Thank you for your letter of 30 June seeking clarification about my statement in the House and the Government's proposals on decommissioning. I have not replied before since you have been meeting NIO Ministers and myself more or less constantly since we received your letter, and we have been trying to meet as many of your concerns as possible. Paul Murphy's statement in the talks on 16 July also sought to deal with a lot of your questions. But a reply now may still be helpful.

As we have discussed, my aim is to get onto the substantive negotiations as soon as possible. Endless discussion of procedure and participation is not bringing a lasting settlement any closer. I believe you have everything to gain and nothing to lose from full participation in all-party talks on the basis we have set out. I recognise your concern about talking to parties whose commitment to exclusively peaceful means remains to be established. Sinn Fein will of course have to declare their total and absolute commitment to the Mitchell principles of peace and democracy before they join the talks proper, and must expect to be kept fully to them.

- 2 -

You also raise a lot of detailed points.

On the timetable, we intend to begin substantive negotiations on 15 September. We are very keen for this to be on the current basis of all-party talks, but if this proves impossible, I am determined to press ahead with substantive negotiations in any way I can, as I told you on 21 July.

You also ask about the six week time period to assess the IRA ceasefire. The six weeks run from the date of the ceasefire itself.

Our political judgement of whether Sinn Fein should be invited to join the talks at the end of that time will be made on the basis of all the available evidence in the round. Any evidence of continued paramilitary activity such as targeting and surveillance will be fully taken into account, as will other unacceptable activity such as so-called punishment beatings, bearing in mind the Loyalist position also. We will certainly consult with you and other parties about the nature of the ceasefire and an invitation to Sinn Fein to join the talks, although in the end the decision is for us alone under the relevant legislation.

You also ask about what happens during the six weeks. As we have made clear, there can be discussions between Sinn Fein and British Ministers. There are also likely to be discussions with the Independent Chairmen and bilaterally with other parties. In addition, Sinn Fein can take up offices in Castle Buildings, as indeed they already have done. But there is no question of participation in the talks themselves until they receive an invitation.

- 3 -

On decommissioning, Paul Murphy has already provided a good deal of clarification on behalf of the two Governments, including on the sub-committee and the Independent Commission. Our position in general remains that possession of illegal weapons, and the threat of violence this implies, is intolerable in a democracy. I can assure you that I will never be swayed in my political judgments by any violence or threat of violence from any quarter. I assume the same is true of you.

This still leaves the question of how illegally-held arms are to be got rid of. We will seize them whenever we can but the truth is that decommissioning of the rest is bound to depend on the cooperation of the paramilitary organisations themselves.

Our view is exactly as I set it out in the House of Commons on 25 June, namely that implementing the Mitchell Report means that at least some actual decommissioning should take place during the negotiations. It is not our interpretation that decommissioning has to begin at the beginning of the talks and end at the end of them, or that a timetable has to be laid down in advance, although we would certainly have absolutely no objection if either could be achieved. We certainly want to see as much decommissioning as possible as soon as possible.

As far as the Independent Commission is concerned, as Paul Murphy has indicated, it should be formally established by 29 July, and fully ready to go by the end of August. We will certainly be consulting you about Chairmanship and membership. We are also determined that a decommissioning scheme or

- 4 -

schemes should be available for it to consider by the beginning of September, although schemes would also have to be looked at by the parties in the talks.

You also ask about the review mechanism. The position remains as set out in the two Governments' "possible conclusions" paper. Any participant can raise any concern about progress in any area. There is no automatic halt to the talks, but we would certainly share your concern that there should be balanced progress across the whole agenda if the negotiations are to move ahead successfully.

You raise the links between Sinn Fein and the IRA. Paul Murphy has spelled out our view that the two organisations are inextricably linked. As I have said, once Sinn Fein join the negotiations, they will have to make clear their total and absolute commitment to the six Mitchell principles of democracy and non-violence. Any party which demonstrably dishonours its commitment to the Mitchell principles will no longer be entitled to participate in the talks. These principles of course include the total disarmament of all paramilitary organisations, as well as the renunciation of the use of, or threat of, force to influence negotiations.

We have also discussed the importance of the principle of consent. As you know, I regard this as absolutely fundamental and believe that, once we get into substantive negotiations, the need for its acceptance by all the participants is bound to figure high on the agenda, although it cannot be a precondition for participation.

- 5 -

You also asked about confidence-building measures. I agree that these are needed for the Unionist community just as much as for the Nationalist community. I am ready to discuss what measures we might be able to take in this respect.

I very much hope that you will be able to support the two governments' proposals on decommissioning, as the best available and broadly acceptable way forward, despite its inadequacies in your view, and help the talks to move on to the substantive issues on 15 September.

David Trimble, Esq., M.P.