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Filed on:

From the Private Secretary

21 July 1997

Dear John,

MEETING WITH THE UUP, 21 JULY

The Prime Minister met Trimble, Taylor, Donaldson and Maginnis for 75 minutes this afternoon. Dr. Mowlam, Jonathan Powell, Alastair Campbell and I were there on our side. Although it was a difficult meeting, the atmosphere was reasonably constructive throughout. Different views were clearly visible on the UUP side, notably about immediate tactics. Maginnis was by some way the most hard line of the four, and constantly made clear his scepticism about the whole approach of bringing in Sinn Fein, without much attempt by Trimble to silence him. The conversation jumped about all over the place and I have not tried to record every twist and turn.

The Prime Minister began by saying that there was clearly an impasse, which the media were presenting as high noon. The basic problem, as he saw it, was that the UUP wanted agreement from the British and Irish Governments that Sinn Fein would be expelled from the talks if there was no actual decommissioning after a certain period of time. Unfortunately, he could not deliver this. But he did not want the talks to collapse over this point, and preferred not to go into bilateral discussions. This would be a far harder process to manage, not least from the UUP's point of view. He saw only two alternatives, either to find a way through the present difficulties with all-party talks, or to proceed to substantive negotiations in a different way.

Maginnis said that the present situation had been reached because the Government had negotiated with Sinn Fein secretly while the constitutional parties were stuck in the talks. Sinn Fein would now be in the talks without the previous requirements about giving up violence having been fulfilled. The other parties would now have to negotiate with the IRA leadership with no way of kicking them out.

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The Prime Minister said that there had not been secret negotiations with Sinn Fein, and we had not changed our position on decommissioning. It was also not true that there would be no pressures on Sinn Fein. If they did not negotiate in good faith on decommissioning, this was bound to create a serious situation.

Trimble said that, in the letter of 9 July, the Government had guaranteed that Sinn Fein would not be expelled from the talks whatever happened about decommissioning. If the Government's position was different from this, it could be crucial. He hoped the Government could clarify what they meant in the letter. Dr. Mowlam commented that we could perhaps say something to the effect that progress would be needed in taking forward the Mitchell principles, including the principle about disarmament of paramilitary organisations. The Prime Minister said that we would look to see whether there was any clarification we could give on this point.

The Prime Minister continued that the important thing was to keep our eyes on the substantive discussions. This was where Sinn Fein would have their real problems. Meanwhile, he would continue to see whether he could get the Irish Government to use some words about expectation of actual decommissioning, although he would want to be sure that this would have some effect on Trimble if he achieved it. Trimble raised again the question of decommissioning schemes. He would want these talked about in some way before 15 September, without them being stuck in the sub-committee where others would simply filibuster.

The Prime Minister said that we would look further at this too. He repeated that he did not want to dump the talks process, even though it might be the case that a settlement would be hard to find via this route. In response to a question from Taylor, the Prime Minister clarified that he meant by this that it was hard to envisage a settlement to which all parties would agree, including Sinn Fein. But if they rejected a settlement and went back to violence, their irredeemable nature would be plain for all to see.

Maginnis said that the position would never be as clear cut as that. The Irish and Hume would always protect Sinn Fein from this kind of isolation. Trimble commented that he could nevertheless see advantages in confronting Sinn Fein with the need to accept the consent principle. The Prime Minister said that he had always regarded this as most important. It would certainly be difficult for Sinn Fein to accept it. It would also be difficult for them in substantive

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negotiations when it became clear that the outcome would not be a transitional arrangement on the way to a united Ireland. In any case, he was absolutely attached to the September to May timetable for a settlement.

Trimble said that he was happy with this timetable. The UUP had no interest in seeing the process strung out either. Maginnis however said that it would not be possible to win the military/psychological battle with the Republicans in 8 months. He repeated that we would never get to a position where the Irish and SDLP agreed a settlement but Sinn Fein did not. So we should not let them into the talks in the first place. He could never be convinced that Sinn Fein would become a political party.

Trimble raised again the assurances to Sinn Fein mentioned by Ray Burke in London on Friday. What was he referring to? What secret promises had HMG made? The Prime Minister said that he was not aware that the Irish had made any promises to Sinn Fein, although he could not guarantee that they had not. In response to Maginnis' point, he said that it was impossible to get the Irish and SDLP into substantive negotiations without Sinn Fein, without trying to bring Sinn Fein along first. Even if Sinn Fein now came into the talks, it might well prove necessary to build from the centre. What he wanted to do was talk about the substance of the issues, for example the ideas in the Joint Framework Document.

Dr. Mowlam said that the new ceasefire had been greeted with reticence in Northern Ireland. The UUP had an opportunity to give a lead in this situation. Trimble said that this was not the right reading of the situation. The IRA would go back to violence as soon as their political efforts were getting no-where. The advice he was receiving was that he should not be conned by Sinn Fein, and should not allow them to join the talks. Donaldson commented that the UUP had bailed out the Government in the talks on several occasions and got no thanks for it. The various situations had been created by the Government without consulting the UUP. Now they were being asked to save the Government's bacon again. But every time they did so, they lost credibility. The Unionists had precious little to show for 27 years of suffering terrorism. There might be a hope of a political settlement, but there was no guarantee that this would bring real peace. What benefit could the Unionists point to from the current process?

The Prime Minister said that all the parties except Sinn Fein had accepted the consent principle. That would be upfront in the negotiations. Of course there were no guarantees that a settlement would bring absolute peace. But there

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was no possible outcome from the present process except a settlement within the Union. He did not see the risks for the UUP in trying to negotiate on the present basis.

Taylor asked again whether the consent principle could be inscribed as the first item on the agenda of the substantive talks. That would help enormously. The Prime Minister said he was not sure whether this was achievable, especially if the suggestion was that it should be the first item. But he would look at this. Trimble commented that it was clear that British policy was determined by the Irish. The Joint Framework Document essentially entailed Northern Ireland leaving the UK. The Prime Minister said that he did not accept this. It might be right that the new ceasefire would end in violence once again, but the effort was still worth making.

Trimble said that he had had an agreement with Paddy Mayhew and Michael Ancram that the talks would bypass Strand 1 and go straight to Strands 2 and 3 (comment: not my recollection). But the most important thing was to build confidence in the Unionist community. The new Government had spent the last two months giving comfort to Sinn Fein. An equivalent process was now needed with the Unionists. He had not even received an answer to his letter, unlike Sinn Fein. There was a feeling that a ceasefire would be followed by more concessions to Sinn Fein. Unionists did not feel as if they were treated like citizens of Britain – BBC Belfast had a lot to answer for. The current proposals on decommissioning had no credibility and he would not be able to support them on Wednesday. But he would not be walking out of the talks. He agreed with the Prime Minister that the need was to talk about the substantive issues. But he needed to have a clear idea of where the process was going.

The Prime Minister ran through the issues the UUP had raised. He did not know whether he could give them satisfaction on any of them. He probably could not. But he was prepared to have another look. However, if he did deliver, he would expect the UUP to support the decommissioning proposals. Taylor said that time was very short before the vote on Wednesday. Trimble commented that he did not want to agree a decommissioning paper this side of August, and then be shot at for six weeks by Paisley and McCartney. He thought the public mood might change with more time. He was proposing to announce a process of consultation in his party. He hoped this would settle people down. Maginnis said that he did not think himself it was worth running on the issue to September. Nothing much would have changed by then.

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Donaldson raised the nature of the latest ceasefire. During the last ceasefire, there had been plenty of paramilitary activity. Would the Government give Sinn Fein automatic entry to the talks after six weeks, or would they use the period to assess genuinely IRA activity, including targeting and punishment beatings. Dr. Mowlam said that the government would make a political judgement in the round, but all these things would be taken into account. The only difficulty with punishment beatings was that we had not used them as the basis to expel the Loyalists from the talks. So they could be one of the criteria, but too obvious hypocrisy had to be avoided.

The Prime Minister said that it was not yet clear whether it was better to let things come to a crunch on Wednesday or leave this to later. If he could deliver some movement in the UUP direction, his own instinct was that it would be better to bring things to a head now, if the UUP could vote for the proposals. Meanwhile, it was important for the UUP to make clear they were not walking out of the talks, although there was still disagreement on decommissioning. He would talk to the Irish again, and would then come back to Trimble.

The meeting concluded with discussion of media handling, with Maginnis playing a notably unhelpful role. The Prime Minister said that Trimble should try to get back in the driving seat. He should say that he had made clear his dissatisfaction to the Government, and the strength of feeling about this in the Unionist community. He would be listening to the Government to see whether these concerns had been met in any way. This would set up a position where the UUP could move if they wanted. He repeated that, if he could achieve some movement, he hoped that Trimble would agree to support the proposals on Wednesday.

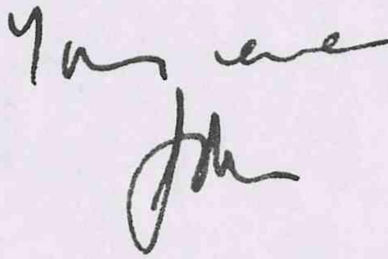
Comment: the Prime Minister noted down the UUP's requests at different times in the meeting as attached. He has subsequently taken up 2 and 5 with the Irish. He thinks that 3 and 4 are achievable, in one way or another. 1, 6 and 7 can be covered through unilateral language, which might be best included in a reply to Trimble, since importance is obviously now attached to this. I attach a first shot at a draft for comments as soon as possible. We will obviously have to consider how far any reply should be cleared with the Irish in advance.

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

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'John Holmes', with a stylized flourish at the end.

JOHN HOLMES

John McKerville
Northern Ireland Office

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