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 10 DOWNING STREET
 LONDON SW1A 2AA

 SUBJECT
 MASTER

Filed on:

From the Private Secretary

1 August 1997

Dear Ken,

CONVERSATION WITH THE TAOISEACH, 1 AUGUST

The Prime Minister and the Taoiseach spoke on the telephone this morning for just over ten minutes. The Prime Minister said that he wanted to touch base with the Taoiseach before their respective holidays. The situation on the ground seemed reasonably satisfactory in general, although the defused bomb in Fermanagh was obviously worrying. It might well be the responsibility of the Continuity Army Council (as Ahern immediately suggested) but there was obviously a worry about IRA connivance of one kind or another. Ahern said that he thought this was unlikely.

The Prime Minister said that he remained keen to preserve the present multi-party peace process. He had talked again to Trimble earlier in the week. Trimble had been in reasonable mood, but he still needed a bit more from the two Governments if he was to go along with the decommissioning proposals. The Prime Minister continued that he had told the Taoiseach when they had last spoken that he would not come back to him on wording unless it was clear that this would deliver Trimble. He had made this clear to Trimble too, and asked Trimble to reflect over August, with a view to another meeting at the end of the month. His own impression remained that if the two Governments could say something more on actual decommissioning and the consent principle, this might be enough to deliver Trimble. Ahern said that, as far as he was concerned, the position remained the same. He would go back to Adams and Hume with different wording if the Prime Minister would assure him that this would deliver Trimble. The Prime Minister said that he was trying to move Trimble more towards emphasis on the principle of consent. But Trimble was having a hard time with his activists.

The Prime Minister repeated that he was very keen on preserving the present peace process. Ahern agreed. Bilateral talks could easily get side-

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tracked or lost, without new progress. The Prime Minister commented that Trimble thought the Irish wanted to get him out of the talks. Ahern said that this was not so. They strongly believed that if Trimble was out of the talks, things would be very difficult.

The Prime Minister confirmed his view that, if the situation on the ground stayed reasonably calm, there was a good chance of keeping Trimble in. But Trimble would need to know that decommissioning could genuinely be envisaged, without moving away from the idea that it would have to be involuntary. Ahern said that everyone wanted to see decommissioning happen, as long as there was no question of it being forced.

The Prime Minister said that the establishment of the Independent Commission was very important, as a signal that the process was going on, and to avoid any impression of delay. Setting up the Independent Commission would increase the pressure on Trimble to stay in the process, by depriving him of reasons to stay out. Ahern commented that it had been agreed to try to get all the mechanisms in place by 15 September. The Prime Minister said that he hoped the Independent Commission could be set up in the next couple of weeks, if possible. Ahern said that he would talk to his officials again about this. Meanwhile, he assumed we had no problem with de Chastelain as Chairman of the Commission. The Prime Minister thought we did not. He added that he would want to speak to the Taoiseach again after the holiday break, before he saw Trimble. The aim had to be to get everything in place by early September.

The Prime Minister asked for the Taoiseach's assessment of where Sinn Fein now stood. Ahern said that he had been worried about them, not least following the apparent IRA involvement in plans to raid the bank at Ballsbridge. However, it looked as if instructions for this pre-dated the ceasefire. In general, the ceasefire seemed to have taken IRA activists by surprise, but perhaps that was not a bad thing. For the moment, he thought that the movement was "okay". He hoped that August could be got through calmly. The news of marches looked reasonably good for the most part. He also had the impression from businessmen and others in Northern Ireland that they did want Sinn Fein in the talks, and also hoped that the Irish Government would help the UUP to stay in.

The Prime Minister repeated in conclusion that, if we could give Trimble something, he would find it very hard to resist pressure on him to stay in the process. Ahern confirmed that he was willing to help.

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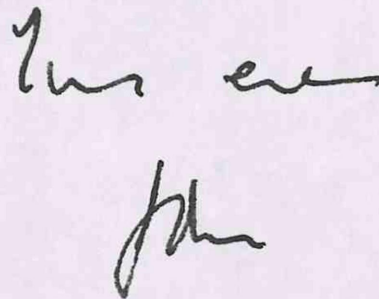
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Comment

Another very friendly conversation. The Prime Minister believes that Ahern probably will be able to deliver wording along the lines of what we want, as long as there is a degree of confidence that Trimble can be delivered.

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

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

JOHN HOLMES

K. Lindsay, Esq.,
Northern Ireland Office.

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