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10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA

From the Principal Private Secretary

14 October 1997

SUBJECT
MASTER

Filed on:

Dee Her,

MEETING WITH PETER ROBINSON, 13 OCTOBER

The Prime Minister had a private meeting with Peter Robinson in the margins of his visit to the Connswater Shopping Centre in East Belfast. Robinson was alone. Dr. Mowlam, Jonathan Powell and I were there on our side. The meeting, which lasted some 20 minutes, took place between two of the Prime Minister's forays into the Connswater crowd (which was, as you know, much less large and threatening than the media have since suggested).

Robinson said that the chants of the crowd showed what Unionists thought of the Prime Minister shaking Adams's hand. In his view, the handshake was no more regrettable than the artificial elevation of the importance of Sinn Fein in the talks. The truth was they were still wedded to terrorism and had not changed. This was just a tactical phase in their strategy to achieve a united Irish Socialist republic. For the Prime Minister, as the mouthpiece of democracy in the United Kingdom, to meet the mouthpiece of terrorism dragged down democracy. The DUP got more votes than Sinn Fein but were excluded from the talks because Sinn Fein had been artificially inserted into them. The DUP had been told that, if they were not in the talks, their views would not be heard. That was not acceptable, and not how Sinn Fein had been treated when they were out of the talks. At the last Election, the DUP and McCartney had represented 43 per cent of the Unionist vote. Trimble's vote was dwindling by the day, and the DUP probably now represented a majority of Unionist opinion. For this opinion not to be represented in the talks meant there was no stable basis for a settlement. He had a sense of *deja vu* from Sunningdale – a weak Unionist leader signing deals he could not deliver. The Government had taken the wrong road. They should deal with constitutional politicians, not those who were really terrorists.

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The Prime Minister said that if Sinn Fein had signed up to the Mitchell Principles, they were entitled to take part in the talks. Only time would tell whether they were genuinely committed to peaceful means. But nothing of substance was lost in the meantime by having them there. The Unionists should be there too, to confront them. He was not himself yielding anything on principle or substance. The DUP would be much better off in the talks. He believed at least the bones of a settlement would come out of the talks, and the DUP should be there.

Robinson commented that it was not possible to square the circle of Unionism and what Sinn Fein/IRA wanted. The Prime Minister said that they would not get a united Ireland, and if they went back to violence, they would be out of the talks and their position diplomatically and internationally would be untenable. We would not be worse off in this position. Robinson disagreed. The Government was showing bad judgement. Sinn Fein/IRA had not repudiated terrorism. John Major had said during the previous ceasefire that, if they went back to violence, they would be condemned by everyone. In fact, the pan-Nationalist consensus had formed up behind them again very quickly.

The Prime Minister said that the position was entirely different from what it had been. He repeated that it was important for the DUP to be there. Robinson said that he had a fundamental difficulty with the whole process. He had been driven into politics by the murder of a schoolfriend by an IRA unit commanded by Gerry Adams. Entering the talks with Sinn Fein there would be to repudiate everything he stood for during his political life. The IRA organisation was still there, and they showed no real remorse. He could not take on faith that they had become democrats. He did not believe they ever could. The whole process was one of concessions to the IRA. Real Unionists did not want so-called confidence-building measures or concessions over prisoners. They simply wanted to be treated like anyone else in a democratic country.

Robinson continued that the DUP had been shabbily treated after their last meeting with the Prime Minister. Once Trimble had agreed to stay in the talks, they had been ignored. They had been told that they could not have the minutes of the talks and had had only perfunctory meetings. He repeated that the DUP would not come into the talks. Rather, other people would start to leave them. What he was saying was in tune with the real feelings of the Unionist people.

The Prime Minister said that if the DUP were saying they could never come into the talks, there was a real problem. Robinson said that they could not

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enter the talks because there was no real Sinn Fein commitment to peaceful means. He did not believe that this could change. The Prime Minister said this was not certain. As long as the key principles such as consent were upheld, nothing would be lost. If the IRA went back to violence, he was convinced they would be in a very difficult position. Robinson said he did not accept this. He predicted that they would go back to violence, that they would blame the British Government and the Unionists, as they had last time, and that they would attract Nationalist support again.

The Prime Minister said that the Government had to continue to talk to the DUP. Meanwhile, he hoped the DUP would not box themselves in entirely. Dr. Mowlam added that the Government would talk to the DUP, but could not really negotiate with them on the same basis as with other parties. The reason they had not been given the minutes was that other parties had objected. Robinson commented that, if the talks were such a tender plant as Dr. Mowlam suggested, they were not likely to flourish.

The Prime Minister repeated that he wanted the DUP to be in a position where they might come into the talks if they could see that a settlement acceptable to the Unionists might come out of them. Robinson said that the outcome was in one sense less important than who was in the talks, if they were not committed to peace. If there were changes in the way in which the process was conducted, and if it was not just a question of appeasement of Sinn Fein, and if weapons were handed over, nothing would be impossible.

The Prime Minister said that he wanted the DUP to be kept fully informed. His strategy was to bend over backwards to get people into the process, but then to yield nothing on the substance. Robinson said that the view of the DUP "officer corps" was that they wanted to be in the talks, but could see no way in which they could be in present circumstances.

Comment:

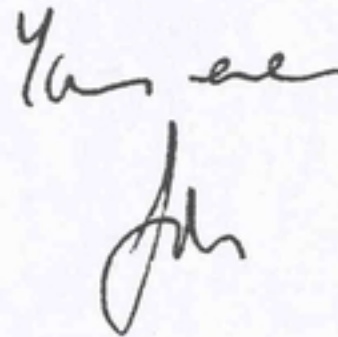
The meeting concluded at this point. Robinson's demeanour was not hostile, but he spoke with some passion, particularly when he referred to his reasons for joining politics (he showed the Prime Minister a picture of IRA atrocities at the same time). His opposition to joining the talks was firm, but he was careful not to close the door entirely. The Prime Minister believes that we must keep talking to the DUP at regular intervals. He should see Dr. Paisley himself before too long.

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I am copying this to John Grant (Foreign and Commonwealth Office) and Jan Polley (Cabinet Office), and to Stephen Wright (Washington) and Veronica Sutherland (Dublin) by fax.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Jan ee' on the top line and 'John' on the bottom line, written in a cursive style.

JOHN HOLMES

Ken Lindsay, Esq.,
Northern Ireland Office.

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