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10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA

From the Private Secretary

14 October 1997

Dear Ken,

NORTHERN IRELAND: TALKS WITH THE PARTIES, 13 OCTOBER

The Prime Minister spent well over an hour touring the party delegation offices in Castle Buildings, and meeting all the parties, together with the Independent Chairmen and the Irish delegation. I have recorded separately the meetings with the Alliance and Sinn Fein. I record below briefly all the other meetings. Dr Mowlam, Paul Murphy, Jonathan Powell, Alastair Campbell, Jonathan Stephens and I were there throughout.

Independent Chairmen

All three Chairmen were present, together with their staffs. The Prime Minister thanked the Chairmen for all their efforts, and hoping that they had not had too much occasion to regret taking on the task. Mitchell said that he saw a reasonable chance of progress. He hoped Trimble understood it was in his interests to move quickly, since he was taking political hits on a daily basis. He therefore needed a solution within the Union quickly, to cut off the flow of criticism. The Prime Minister said that Trimble did understand this, and did want a settlement. His own feeling was that there was common ground on the essence of the likely agreement, and the issues were largely presentational.

Mitchell agreed. With the exception of Sinn Fein, all the parties knew where the answer lay. The Independent Chairmen would push the process hard to identify the areas of agreement. At some point fairly soon, the Governments and the SDLP/UUP would need to table position papers. It was difficult to do the real negotiation in such a large gathering, but equally people should not feel excluded from the process.

The Prime Minister asked about Sinn Fein's attitude. Mitchell said that their constant public denial of a relationship with the IRA undermined their credibility. They also continued to mouth united Ireland rhetoric. But they

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seemed to want to engage in the process. He had warned Adams and McGuinness nearly two years ago that they had to begin to condition their supporters to the inevitable outcome. They had taken the view that they could not give up their trump card of insistence on a united Ireland until the end of the process. But they were skilful and articulate, and would make a genuine contribution. Unfortunately, the SDLP had been hurt politically by the process and it was not clear they were capable of moving without Sinn Fein.

The Prime Minister commented that the SDLP should be seen as the leaders of the nationalist community. It was frustrating for them, and for others, that Sinn Fein had been so much centre stage because of the violence. Mitchell agreed. It could be argued that Sinn Fein had bombed their way to the table. Sinn Fein knew they would not get a united Ireland. The question was therefore whether sufficient content could be given to the North/South arrangements to satisfy their electorate. There would in any case be a problem at the end of the settlement, with different parties presenting it very differently. Paisley and McCartney would campaign against a settlement, and would obviously quote what Sinn Fein said as evidence in their favour. The Prime Minister's presentational skills would therefore be very important.

Irish Delegation

The Irish team consisted of Dermot Gallagher, Liz O'Donnell, David Donoghue and David Cooney. O'Donnell said that the talks were going reasonably well. The Chairmen were setting a good pace. The need now was to produce papers. The Prime Minister commented that momentum was crucial. The talks must not get bogged down. Gallagher agreed. Moving forward also kept pressure on Paisley and McCartney by showing the talks to be the only real game in town. O'Donnell said that the DUP seemed to be moving from outright opposition to sniping. She thought Paisley might come into the talks, but McCartney never would. Robinson was desperate to get in.

The Prime Minister said that there was a real possibility to move things forward. If the opportunity was lost, it was not clear when it would come back. He believed Trimble did want a settlement. The UUP would not have come into the talks if they had not thought there was something in it for them. The essence of the deal might be to give cover in Strand 3 for what the Unionists would have to accept in Strand 2. Gallagher said that, if Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution were to be changed, there had to be significant North/South arrangements. East/West cover could be given, but only in the right circumstances.

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Labour

The Labour delegation consisted of Malachi Curran, Hugh Casey and Martin Dumigan. Curran was grateful for the Prime Minister's visit and complimentary about Dr Mowlam and Paul Murphy. They believed things were going in the right direction. The body language in the talks was getting better. They themselves were from the middle ground. Casey said that the Government should not try to appease the extremes, for example over prisoners.

The Prime Minister said that he understood the point. He wanted the talks to be inclusive but without any sacrifice of principle. This was a last chance to get a settlement through. He could not say with confidence whether Sinn Fein were genuine or not at this stage.

SDLP

Hume, Mallon, Henderson and McGrady were there. Hume began by repeating what the Prime Minister had said to him about a larger meeting to go over the settlement proposals in detail. Mallon welcomed this. But he wanted to make two points. First, there was an important demarcation line between negotiations inside the talks and what went on outside. Trimble had to concentrate on the talks, not constantly be looking for favours from the Prime Minister. He hoped that, having won some points from the Prime Minister, Trimble would now focus on the talks. The Prime Minister said he understood the point, but it had been hard to get Trimble to stay in the talks and anchor him there. He was happy to talk to the SDLP in detail too.

Mallon went on to raise the parades legislation. He was very concerned about the proposed extension of the remit. This would open up huge problems for the future. Dr Mowlam explained the changes she had in mind, and promised to send the SDLP a copy of the draft Bill. The essence of the Bill remained the same. She understood the worries about organisations like the Gaelic Athletics Association. But there would be no immediate action on the extended remit, which would give more time to think things through. What was proposed was a fair compromise which did not change the essence of the recommendations of the North Commission. The Prime Minister said that discussion should continue over this. Mallon said that serious problems could not be solved by bad legislation.

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Hume said that he appreciated the priority the Prime Minister was giving to the talks. This helped to create the right atmosphere for the people of Northern Ireland. The Prime Minister's predecessors had never taken the same interest. The Prime Minister commented that there was now an historic opportunity for progress. There might be only one shot left at this.

Henderson returned to the dangers of opening the door to action over cultural activities. The Prime Minister said that the key issues were non-violence and consent. That is what he would be emphasising.

Women's Coalition

Monica McWilliams, Bronagh Hinds, Pearl Sager and three others were there. The Prime Minister began by recalling his previous meeting with the Coalition, and saying that he would be happy to meet them again in Downing Street. Monica McWilliams said that Dr Mowlam and Paul Murphy had done an excellent job, and transformed the situation. But she wanted to emphasise the wider aspects of the new Government's policies to create a new democracy in Britain, for example creating a Scottish Parliament and a Welsh Assembly. The new principles of the Government should be applied to Northern Ireland too. Northern Ireland should not be run as it had been in the past. One issue was electoral systems. The list used for the Forum elections had real advantages, not just because it had put their Coalition in the talks, but because it helped pluralism and encouraged people to cross the traditional divides. She also hoped that the Government would pledge that any new Assembly would have 50 per cent women membership. She was also concerned that preparations should begin for the referendum campaign. To be successful, this would need resources and an early start, to educate people. The parties themselves could only do so much. The Government had to be fully involved.

The Prime Minister said that he would certainly like to see more women in politics in Northern Ireland and would proselytize for it, although it would be difficult to impose. He wondered whether old party loyalties would disappear after a settlement. McWilliams said that sectarianism was not likely to disappear overnight. But she hoped the smaller parties could get together and build new centre ground.

Bronagh Hinds repeated that the Coalition did not want a constitutional settlement in Northern Ireland inside the old framework. Nothing was now sacred in Britain, and the same should apply in Northern Ireland. The

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environment should be created for a political realignment. That was what they had meant in the talks that morning when they had described a settlement as a transition, although this had raised obvious Unionist fears.

UDP

Gary McMichael began by saying that they would have liked the same privileges as the Alliance and Sinn Fein. But it was very important for the Prime Minister to be here to support the talks process. He wanted to raise political prisoners. The Government had never acknowledged that release of political prisoners was conceptually possible. If the Government could say this, even if there was no instant action, this would be very helpful.

Dr Mowlam said we understood the importance of the issue. We were looking hard at how the Life Sentence Review Board worked, but she could give no guarantees at this stage. The Prime Minister added that the Jason Campbell case had shown the sensitivity of this issue. We wanted to do everything possible to help the peace process, but in some areas action could do more harm than good.

McMichael accepted that recent events had been difficult. They were not of the UDP's choosing. But if there was no movement on the issue, this would have a bad impact, and vice versa. Of course the paramilitaries would have to recognise the position of the victims too. White repeated that what was needed was some indication of some action somewhere down the line on prisoner releases.

The Prime Minister advised the UDP not to stoke up this issue. Action was more difficult when there was media attention. He understood that there were those in the community – relatives and friends of those in jail – who wanted action. But there were many others who looked at it differently. He asked about wider attitudes on the ground. McMichael said that people were not yet convinced that the IRA were genuine in giving up violence, and the activities of the Continuity Army Council and others did not help. The UDP's view was that unrealistic politicians should be confronted in the talks. But continuing bombs comforted the doubters and, without action on the prisoners, there was growing frustration. A demonstration the day before had attracted 10,000 people in support both of action on prisoners and participation in the talks. It was significant that speakers praising Trimble and criticising Paisley and McCartney had been applauded.

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The Prime Minister said his instinct was to press on. McMichael agreed, but commented that the Prime Minister should not be held up by Sinn Fein. They had to understand the implications of sufficient consensus. If the talks did not move ahead quickly, those still engaged in violence would blow up the process.

PUP

Smyth appreciated the Prime Minister's presence in Northern Ireland, and his comments on consent. This remained the vital issue. Adams had to tell the Loyalists that the war was over. The talks could not be a stepping stone to see what Sinn Fein could get out of them, to be abandoned if progress was not enough. The Prime Minister agreed. He would be stressing the importance of consent and non-violence to Sinn Fein.

Ervine said that the Prime Minister was in Belfast because progress had been made. This had to be protected. He would not raise prisoners with the Prime Minister – this could be addressed within the talks. An approach based on concessions for each party would not work, since all were concerned. The PUP were not in the process to receive goodies, but because they wanted to be and to make progress.

The Prime Minister said that the faster the process could be pushed along, the better. The essentials of an agreement were visible. Issues like prisoners could be tackled, but they were sensitive, as the Jason Campbell case had shown. He believed in the peace process, and that hope was shared in the rest of Britain as well as in Northern Ireland. Meanwhile it was important to get the great handshake out of the way, and move on to more important issues. He asked about attitudes in the community.

Ervine said that they were currently comfortable, but there were always banana skins to be watched. Smyth said that the creation of Scottish and Welsh Assemblies was important, since it meant that Northern Ireland could develop relations with other parts of Britain, as well as with Ireland. Ervine added that one major issue was the increasing separation of the two communities. The process of ghettoisation would continue even after a settlement, unless something was done. The main challenge was greater integration in education. Children should learn to live together early, rather than coming to realise the need for it too late in life, as he had done.

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UUP

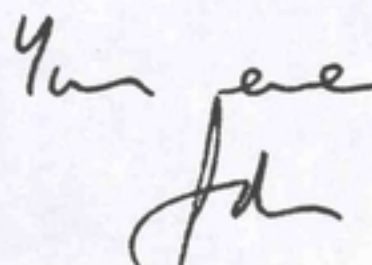
Trimble was accompanied by Taylor, Donaldson, Empey and one other. Trimble repeated what he had said at the earlier meeting with the Prime Minister about increasing anxiety in the Unionist community. There was a need for balance and confidence, not least in terms of headline issues.

Empey mentioned the long-standing problem of the words in which developments in Northern Ireland were expressed - "Anglo/Irishese" or "Humespeak". Expressions associated with the peace process were in more Hibernian language than Unionists could be comfortable with, and this sent signals in one direction only. He would take this up in detail with Dr Mowlam.

Taylor endorsed this and underlined the fraying of confidence inside the UUP. The UFF's withdrawal from the ULMC, just announced, was a bad sign, and was the work of Paisley. It was important that the Prime Minister, in talking to Adams, made clear that this was their last chance. President Clinton had told the UUP very clearly in Washington that there would be no third bite of the apple for Sinn Fein.

The Prime Minister said that he appreciated the concern there was about the need to reassure victims of violence, although no immediate announcements could be made. This should be pursued with Dr Mowlam and Paul Murphy. On Sinn Fein, he had talked to President Clinton. They were in total agreement on the point. He would stress non-violence and consent to Sinn Fein as the foundation stones of a settlement. He wanted to get the handshake out of the way so the process could move on. He understood the importance of confidence-building measures. There had to be a constant battle for hearts and minds.

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



JOHN HOLMES

Ken Lindsay Esq
Northern Ireland Office

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