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19 JUNE 1996

cc: PS/PUS/L (L&B) - B
Mr Thomas (L&B) - B
Mr Leach (L&B) - B

PS/SECRETARY OF STATE (L&B) - B

CABINET BRIEFING: 20 JUNE

1. I attach the usual Cabinet brief.
2. I assume there will be some discussion of Northern Ireland this week, but that the Home Secretary will be expected to report on the details of the Manchester bombing. Nonetheless, I take it the Secretary of State will want to use the opportunity to offer his analysis, report progress in the negotiations and emphasise to colleagues that the basics of our strategy remain valid.

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CABINET: 20 JUNE 1996

IRA's Intentions

1. The best assessment of the IRA's intentions is that the leadership remains uncertain and divided over the way forward. They are likely to regard the Manchester bomb as simply a continuation of their mainland campaign since February: it does not mean a firm decision has been taken to rule out any possibility of a ceasefire. More likely it reflects continuing debate and uncertainty among the leadership and a desire to keep all elements of the IRA on board by showing that all options remain open.

2. Despite speculation of splits, there is no evidence that a split is close. There is certainly evidence of a heated debate with hardline elements strongly opposed to a ceasefire. But fear of a split will constrain the leadership's room for manoeuvre.

Political reaction

3. Politically, the Manchester bomb, and the earlier killing of a Garda officer in the Republic, have had effects for which the IRA may not have calculated.

4. The Irish Government - particularly Bruton personally - have reacted with condemnation for the attacks and Sinn Féin's prevarications over them: so too have Fianna Fail. There is now an excellent opportunity to step up security co-operation. The Talks participants in Belfast - including the SDLP and the Irish Government - have shown renewed determination to make a genuine success of the negotiations in order to show that progress can be made without Sinn Féin. There has been strong Irish American condemnation of the attacks and calls for a immediate ceasefire.

5. An important element in this universal condemnation of the IRA has been our ability to secure and hold the moral high ground. By working with the Irish Government, we have put negotiations in place

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which were open to Sinn Féin in the event of an unequivocal IRA ceasefire. As a result, it is the IRA who is seen throughout Ireland and beyond as the block to inclusive negotiations.

6. We must ensure we maintain this moral high ground. I have therefore repeated that the test for Sinn Féin's entry to negotiations - an unequivocal restoration of the IRA ceasefire - stands, not least because it is now set in legislation. But, of course, in the wake of recent IRA attacks, we and everyone else will need a good deal more convincing that any ceasefire is genuine and unequivocal, and will have to take time to assess any ceasefire carefully.

Security in Northern Ireland

7. A tense situation in Northern Ireland. There is a high level of background IRA activity, although there have been no successful attacks yet. But attacks in Northern Ireland, including large scale bombings, cannot be ruled out, with the almost inevitable consequence of a breakdown of the Loyalist ceasefire.

8. The RUC, with the Army, has recently stepped up precautionary measures. We must be ready to show we have a response if violence worsens, without being panicked into draconian measures which may lose us the moral high ground and regain wider support for the IRA.

Talks Process

9. A much easier atmosphere this week than last, with all the participants (even the DUP) showing clear signs of wanting to make progress and being prepared to reach reasonable compromises on procedural issues.

10. Most of the week has been spent conferring among the participants in order to agree procedural guidelines and the agenda for the rest of the opening plenary session. There could have been

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the potential for endless disputes but, despite a blockage yesterday over status and authority of Ground Rules, all sides - with the possible exception of Mr McCartney - are participating sensibly and in a spirit of compromise. Even the DUP have joined entirely positively in meetings under Mitchell's chairmanship. Mitchell himself - and the other chairmen - are showing skill and confidence in building up trust with the parties. We have encouraged further direct exchanges between the UUP and the Irish Government.

11. This bodes well for progress on more substantive issues, although many difficult issues still remain. For example, with the loyalist parties in the negotiations, decommissioning must still be addressed. But the reality is that to try to force a unilateral start to loyalist disarmament only risks provoking the loyalists to abandon their ceasefire. We still aim to establish a sub-committee on decommissioning, to run in parallel with the three strands of negotiations.

12. The parallel Forum held its first meeting last Friday, which was entirely taken up with procedural matters. The SDLP participated; Sinn Féin stayed away. It is still unclear just how significant a body this will be.

Prospects for the Future

13. It is clearly possible that the Manchester bombing will be repeated, and attacks started in Northern Ireland too provoking loyalist retaliation and a worsening spiral of violence. Or there may be more of the same: isolated major attacks on the mainland, but none in Northern Ireland.

14. Whatever the prospects, we must demonstrate we have a robust policy which can accommodate these eventualities and yet offers hope for progress:

- a firm but fair security policy which responds to the

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level of threat and recognises the need to secure the confidence of the whole community in the actions of the security forces;

- a political process, which remains open to all who are committed exclusively to peaceful means, aimed at securing a widespread accommodation which will provide political stability for the future;
- social and economic policies which address legitimate grievances.

15. It will be all the more important in the coming weeks to provide reassurance that the Government is holding to this clear strategy and, through progress in the talks process, can demonstrate that political progress can still be made.

I attach briefing for tomorrow's Cabinet, with the most recent list of security incidents attached at Annex A.

(SIGNED):

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