

CONFIDENTIAL

File Gpy

**SUBJECT
MASTER**



FAXED - To NIO & others

Filed on:

**10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA**

From the Principal Private Secretary

21 November 1997

See her,

MEETING WITH THE TAOISEACH, 21 NOVEMBER

The Prime Minister had a bilateral with Ahern in the margins of the Jobs Summit in Luxembourg. They spoke for about 20 minutes, squeezed between the end of the morning session and lunch. Ahern was accompanied by Andrews, Gallagher, Mansergh, Teahon and Lennon. Alastair Campbell and I were there on our side.

Ahern said that he had had a friendly and constructive meeting with Trimble the previous day. The chemistry had been good – better than with the Unionists in the past. They had agreed not to overstate the results of the meeting to the outside world, but had also agreed confidentially to set up a small working group to function both within and outside the talks, to try to move forward the constitutional issues and reach agreement if possible, and to discuss also the north-south dimension. The idea was to keep this secret if at all possible, but it had been agreed that both sides would mention it to HMG, and that the SDLP should also be briefed in some way (the aim being to avoid putting in the loop those who would immediately tell Sinn Fein). The idea was that at the end of the group's discussions, Trimble and Ahern might meet again.

Ahern continued that one area where the Unionists could helpfully move was on engagement with Sinn Fein in some way. This would bring huge benefits in helping to tie Sinn Fein in to the process. If the UUP could find some way to have a bilateral with Sinn Fein on a relatively innocuous topic before Christmas, this would be excellent. He understood how difficult this was for the UUP and had acknowledged this to them.

On prisoners, the Prime Minister seemed to have galvanised the British system helpfully after their last meeting in Strasbourg. He hoped this pressure could be maintained. On the Irish side, we had asked them to amend their legislation to allow for maximum sentences of up to 35 years, compared with the 20 years currently allowed under the Irish system. This had been agreed and

CONFIDENTIAL

would go through the Dail soon. For the rest, it was a question of maintaining movement on repatriations and transfers. The position often seemed to be that we had no difficulty in principle with what was proposed, but action still took a long time to work its way through the system. He suggested that Paddy Teahon and myself should keep in close touch about this, to keep up the pressure on respective systems. He (Ahern) and the Prime Minister should not have to worry unduly about this themselves, but they should be alerted if there were continuing problems.

The Irish also believed that it was time for us and them to get together at official level to work through the issues on a north-south body and the east-west context and agree how they should be taken forward. There was a lot of different aspects to this, eg. which technical subjects could be considered by a north-south body. He suggested that small teams on both sides should be nominated to get cracking on this, and report back rapidly. The Prime Minister agreed.

Ahern continued that he welcomed the withdrawal of the 500 soldiers. He hoped that there could be a lot more of this to come. The Irish were getting the message from West Belfast and South Armagh, not just from Sinn Fein, that nothing had really changed since the ceasefire. There had even been an increase in patrolling in West Belfast. If there were good reasons for this, he would have no difficulty with it. But things had been extremely quiet and it was difficult to see what the need was. Meanwhile, the Divis tower had been refurbished, new barracks were being built, and lots of work was going on in South Armagh. He found it hard to explain and defend this activity. Anything we could do on this front would be most welcome.

Ahern also said he wanted to raise Bloody Sunday, in case the Prime Minister had anything new to say, and Roisin McAliskey. David Andrews had been paying particular attention to this. Andrews said that he had talked to Dr. Mowlam. There was considerable pressure on the Nationalist side. There were humanitarian grounds for Roisin McAliskey's release. He believed that Gareth Pierce was preparing an application to the Home Secretary on these lines, with a view to having the extradition proceedings suspended. I commented that the real problem lay with the Germans, who were seeking her extradition. Andrews said that he had been working quietly on them too.

The Prime Minister said that he would respond to the various points that Ahern had raised. On Unionist engagement with Sinn Fein, he would see what he could do. He thought they ought to be able to make some move, although there was no point in concealing the difficulty. It was hard to imagine them going straight to a bilateral. An easier first step might be to address each other in the

talks. Gallagher said that he thought something might be possible in the smaller sub-groups. There were some signs that some in the UUP were uncomfortable with the way things were.

The Prime Minister continued that his own approach was to find out from the UUP and SDLP where their real difficulties were and where the process might finish up. The process had to be moved on, or there was a danger of it stalling. He was therefore thinking of getting agreement on some basic principles, eg. a devolved assembly (powers to be defined), a north-south body (powers to be defined), basic east-west elements, etc. If the main parties could focus on this reasonably soon, it might be possible to have the bare bones of a settlement agreed. He would be giving time to this in the next couple of weeks, and would keep Ahern in touch, particularly on any sticking points. He remained convinced that, for the UUP, the trick was to get the east-west framework right. The north-south dimension would then become easier. He was meanwhile happy for the Irish to proceed with the UUP as Ahern had outlined. Trimble had also reported to us that the meeting with Ahern had been positive and constructive.

The Prime Minister said that we were continuing to work on Bloody Sunday. We would also do what we could on demilitarisation. He had been agitating the system about this himself, and he was keen to go further than the latest battalion withdrawal, to provide evidence that things were happening. He would continue to press for progress, but there were still genuine security problems, not least from the Continuity Army Council. If he was advised that there were genuine security difficulties, and he ignored this advice, his position would be untenable if there was then a serious incident.

Ahern accepted that security advice could not be ignored. He found the same himself. But the CAC had no presence to speak of in West Belfast, and this could not explain the continuing patrolling there. The Prime Minister said that he would look into this. He certainly did not want more troops in Northern Ireland and more military activity than was strictly necessary. Mansergh said that it might be worth telling Sinn Fein that the activities of the CAC were slowing down demilitarisation.

The Prime Minister said that we would continue to see what we could do on the prisoners front, but there were always difficulties about this. In any case, he would not repeat the mistake of the last ceasefire of letting Northern Ireland slip off the screen because there was no violence. He was determined to push on with the process.

Ahern raised the apparent splits in the Republican movement. None of those who had resigned had joined the CAC, and all the main players were still there. But he had met Adams the previous Friday, and he had seemed under more pressure than before. He had been particularly disappointed at the way in which the dissidents had gone public. However, many of the rumours about Bernie Sands seemed misplaced. According to Irish information, she was busy running her own small business in Dundalk, and was not up to much. Meanwhile, he continued to hope that O'Braudaigh could be kept off the airwaves. He had had a row with RTE about this. O'Braudaigh was basically mad, but the media continued to use him when there was no real action.

The Prime Minister went back to the idea of Heads of Agreement. He wanted to see how much progress could be made, so that detailed discussions could then start. He did not see another way of breaking the present logjam, since no-one wanted to put their bottom line on the table. Ahern agreed. It was inevitable that much of the work at present had to be done outside the talks. He looked forward to seeing the Prime Minister again in Luxembourg in three weeks' time, when they could compare notes on the north-south and east-west dimensions.

Comment

This was a very friendly session, although it did not get beyond generalities. What we must now do is ensure that there is a proper dovetailing of our efforts with those of the Irish. I would be grateful for rapid advice on whom we should nominate to talk to them about the north-south and east-west dimensions, so that I can pursue this with Paddy Teahon. We will also need to keep a close eye on prisoners (about which I will talk to the Home Office) and Bloody Sunday. Teahon pressed me hard on both, separately from the meeting reported above, asking why the tariffs for the remaining repatriation cases could not be set now, and whether there would be an answer on Bloody Sunday before Christmas. I stonewalled in both cases. Teahon also gave me a further earful on continuing security works in Northern Ireland.

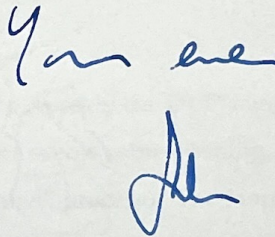
I should add that Teahon was even more positive about the meeting with Trimble than was Ahern. The Irish were now confident that a deal could be done with him, although they were still suspicious about his rapid mood swings. Trimble was also positive about the meeting when he spoke to me late on 20 November. There had been no serious clashes, and the discussions, while frank, had been constructive. The Irish had seemed open-minded on the broader east-west context and the discussion on the relationship between Strands II and III had been all right. Trimble's account of what had been agreed on a working group coincided with what Ahern told us, although he added that this group was expected

CONFIDENTIAL

- 5 -

to do its work in the next week or two. He also commented that he was not sure who to nominate for this group (he described it as two a side, although Teahon seemed to imagine three or four).

I am copying this letter to John Grant (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), Ken Sutton (Home Office), Jan Polley (Cabinet Office), Christopher Meyer (Washington) and Veronica Sutherland (Dublin). I would be grateful if all concerned would keep very close the proposed Irish/UUP working group, at least until it leaks.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'John Holmes', with a stylized flourish below the name.

JOHN HOLMES

Ken Lindsay, Esq.
Northern Ireland Office

CONFIDENTIAL