



10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA

From the Principal Private Secretary

8 December 1997

See her.

MEETING WITH THE LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION

The Prime Minister met William Hague and Andrew Mackay briefly this evening in the House of Commons to discuss Northern Ireland. Jonathan Powell and I were also there.

The Prime Minister explained what we were trying to achieve, and why he had agreed to meet Adams later this week. He underlined that we were working closely with David Trimble. We also kept in touch with the DUP, but it was difficult to make much progress there. The strategy with Sinn Fein was to ensure that, if Sinn Fein went back to violence at any stage, they would have no easy excuses on the basis of what the Government had or had not done. This was important not only in PR terms but also to ensure that the process could be moved on without them if necessary. He hoped Sinn Fein could still be bound into the process but this could not be guaranteed.

The Prime Minister concluded that he wanted to move the talks on rapidly and hoped the bipartisan policy could be maintained. It was important in general, and in particular important that the UUP did not feel they were being pushed in the wrong direction from inside Parliament.

Mr Hague said that he wanted to maintain the bipartisan policy, as he made clear publicly at every opportunity. This did not mean that the Conservatives had to agree with everything the Government did. They felt that, in some areas, the Government were moving too fast, and making concessions all one way, for example about the abolition of internment and meeting Sinn Fein in Downing Street before Sinn Fein had done much to prove they were serious about peaceful means. They feared that, if Sinn Fein did go back to violence, the Government could be vulnerable to criticism for this.

The Prime Minister explained again why he had moved as he had. He had also tried to put in place confidence building measures for the Unionists, although all sides tended to forget what had been done for them as soon as it had been done. He wondered whether it would be helpful to give the Opposition more regular briefing on what was happening but would understand if the Opposition felt this would inhibit them.

Mr Hague said that he would value more regular briefing, since that would enable him to understand better what the Government were doing. It would not inhibit them from criticising particular actions, if they thought they were wrong, without breaking the bipartisan approach. Mr Mackay added that it would be particularly helpful to be briefed in advance on what the Government planned on Bloody Sunday. He understood the difficulties the Government faced. It would be helpful to be briefed on the background before any statement was made.

Comment

This was an entirely friendly meeting, where Hague gave every appearance of wanting to maintain bipartisanship, while maintaining freedom to criticise the detail. The Prime Minister believes that we should make a practice of offering the Opposition more regular briefing. We might have a word about how best to do this.


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