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9/12/97 (1400)*

File & deliver

From the Private Secretary

**SUBJECT
MASTER**

8 December 1997

Filed on

FAXED
Via Concern 8/12

*to Dublin +
Wton*

See Mem,

NORTHERN IRELAND: HEADS OF AGREEMENT

We have had various exchanges with Trimble over the last two to three days, including a conversation between the Prime Minister and Trimble yesterday evening. The discussions have focused on the text of the draft Heads of Agreement, and how to deploy this tactically.

Trimble's line has been that he has no huge problems with the draft Heads of Agreement, but has difficulty over the North-South title. While he accepts that "Council for North-South Cooperation" should be wearable at the end of the day, he is reluctant to make what he sees as a significant move on the UUP's part without being sure of what he gets in return. His fear is that it will take some time to get down to discussion of the details of the powers of this Council. Meanwhile, not least over the Christmas recess, others will be inclined to put the worst possible construction on the title, and portray it as leading to the kind of scenario set out in the infamous Andrews interview. In this context, Trimble claimed to the Prime Minister that Ahern had said many of the same things as Andrews last Thursday, particularly the long list of powers, although he had not mentioned the word government. All this was against the background of a Unionist community perception of Sinn Fein getting a string of concessions, and the UUP nothing. Trimble summed up his position: it was not so much the title that worried him (although it was really SDLP language), but the circumstances of being seen to accept it now.

In response, the Prime Minister made clear to Trimble that he wanted to table something this week if at all possible, and would like to do this before he saw Adams, so that that meeting took place in the right context. He could understand Trimble's tactical reservations about the North-South title, but he remained keen on retaining it. He believed it could be presented publicly as

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ruling out the kind of governmental powers Andrews had been hinting at. Alternative titles for the North-South body were likely to be worse. So he thought it worth tabling a paper on these lines on behalf of HMG alone, although he would want to show it to the Irish and SDLP before we did so. He added that the SDLP and Irish might find very difficult the language about the Council of these islands and the new British/Irish agreement. Without a decent North-South reference, these points would be harder to sell to them.

Trimble thought that both the SDLP and Irish were in fact well on the way to accepting the Council of these islands. The Irish had been making this clear through the press and Mallon had seemed to accept in his last conversation with Trimble that he could live with "two umbrellas", as long as the Council of these islands umbrella did not drip on to the North-South umbrella. Trimble thought that the Irish were trying to soften up the UUP on North-South, by floating quite unacceptable ideas in the hope that the UUP would fall on something less with relief at the end of the day. He repeated his concern about further recent concessions to Sinn Fein, such as the proposed change to the RUC oath, the beginning of a process of changing the RUC's name, and the sudden decision to bring forward the Police Bill.

The Prime Minister said that he did not necessarily want the UUP to sign up instantly to any paper we tabled. Indeed it would alarm the nationalist side if the UUP did so. There was no problem in a paper we tabled being criticised by both sides, as long as it was not rejected and was seen as a basis for discussion.

Trimble said that, in general, he liked the idea of tabling the paper before the Prime Minister saw Adams, and could see the merits of the paper being seen as a basis for discussion, without people signing up to it in the short term.

The Prime Minister suggested we might table the draft on Wednesday. Trimble thought that Tuesday would be better, since he and others were in London on Wednesday, as usual. The Prime Minister said that this might be possible. He would want to reflect further, and come back to Trimble today. We would also need to run the paper across the Irish and the SDLP.

Trimble referred back to his idea that the Prime Minister might address the media in Downing Street after Adams had left, to set the meeting firmly in the context of the democratic process. His impression was that Sinn Fein had not yet worked out their exit strategy, but that they were preparing to leave the talks around the end of February. They would obviously want to pin the blame on

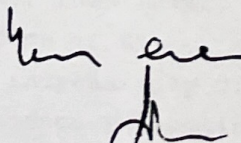
HMG and the UUP. The Prime Minister said he had registered Trimble's point about countering Adams' publicity, and would be ready to do so. More widely, the reason for meeting Adams was to be sure that, without giving away anything of substance, Sinn Fein could not credibly claim that they had not been taken seriously. Trimble said he understood this, although it was difficult for the Unionists, and had been relatively restrained in his public comments.

Comment

Following this conversation, the Prime Minister remains attached to tabling the draft this week, but would still prefer Wednesday to Tuesday if possible. He also remains attached to the "Council for North-South Cooperation" title which he believes is the right one both for the Government and for the Unionists.

I discussed this briefly with Quentin Thomas last night. He told me of the Irish draft Heads of Agreement which they had been given in Dublin on Friday and which I have now seen. I understand that the Irish could give this to Trimble today. After some discussion, our preliminary conclusion was that we might show our draft to the Irish and SDLP and agree that both texts should be tabled in the talks (presumably simultaneously). Although less than ideal in some ways, this would at least provide a focus for discussion, and avoid Unionist fears of an Anglo/Irish stitch-up. We could not back away from our text easily at this stage, vis-a-vis Trimble, while the Irish would no doubt find it difficult to sign up and agree to our text being tabled alone without significant changes. We need to go firm on this conclusion in the course of the morning, as I have discussed separately with Paul Murphy.

I am copying this to John Grant (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), Jan Polley (Cabinet Office), Christopher Meyer in Washington and Veronica Sutherland in Dublin.



JOHN HOLMES

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