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File
cc PMcf
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From the Principal Private Secretary

15 September 1997

Dear Sir,

NORTHERN IRELAND

I should record various exchanges during the day.

As you know, the DFA were inclined this morning to challenge the basis of the deal the Prime Minister had reached with Trimble and the Taoiseach in the course of Sunday. I was able to check this with Paddy Teahon, who confirmed that my understanding was indeed correct. He said he would ensure this was understood in Belfast. Subsequently he told me that the nerves of the Irish delegation in Belfast were still "jangling" because of various fears about what Trimble might or might not do. He said he was calming them down, and telling them to keep their eye on the main ball, which was the very significant prize of getting the UUP into the talks.

Later in the day, when Irish fears did not seem to have calmed down, particularly about whether Trimble would be in the talks the following day, the Prime Minister spoke to Trimble on the telephone. Trimble said that it was all going according to plan. He was keeping the press guessing, but confirmed that he was actively planning to move into the talks the following day. Meanwhile, he was in touch with Paul Murphy about the text of the procedural motion, and was hopeful that this was going in the right direction.

The Prime Minister said that the key was to get the substantive process launched, and to make clear that the business of the initial plenary was concluded. The Irish had fears that, if this was not clear, Paisley might try subsequently to come into the talks and challenge the legality of the conclusion. Trimble doubted whether Paisley would come back into the talks on a face to face basis, although he might return for bilaterals and to strike poses. It would incidentally be helpful if the Government could put out a line to him - he did after all represent as big a proportion of the electorate as Sinn Fein. The Prime

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Minister said that we would do this, if Trimble would find it helpful. Trimble confirmed that he would.

The Prime Minister asked when the opening plenary might be wrapped up. Trimble hoped that this could be done by Tuesday or Wednesday, with the real talks starting the following week. He wanted to talk to Senator Mitchell, Dr. Mowlam and the SDLP about this. He knew the Irish were jittery about the process not moving quickly enough, but he had to take it gently in order to keep his own supporters happy.

I subsequently relayed this conversation to Paddy Teahon, as well as to you. Teahon said that he was continuing to urge calm on the Irish delegation in Belfast.

Trimble rang me later in the day, after his meeting with Mitchell, to say that there were problems about the chairmanships (as predicted). Paul Murphy had suggested that de Chastelain and Mitchell would be joint chairmen of strand 2 in name only. Mitchell had gone further in making clear that he expected to do the job himself, and had claimed that the two governments wanted this. All this seemed to have moved a long way from where Trimble thought it was.

I referred back to the original discussion between the Prime Minister and Trimble, when Trimble had suggested that he did not have problems with Mitchell himself, but found it difficult presentationally to accept that Mitchell should replace de Chastelain. Trimble himself had suggested a fudge to get round this. We had taken up this idea in order to achieve Trimble's major objective of having de Chastelain as chairman of the Independent Commission.

Trimble agreed this was important, but the chairmanship of strand 2 was important as well. If Mitchell took over the whole of strand 2, the key area, this would "not be terribly satisfactory". He wondered whether another solution to the supposed overload problem might be for de Chastelain to pass chairmanship of the important Business Committee to Mitchell. As far as he knew, this suggestion had not been made. I said that we had thought about this, and would look at it again, but I doubted whether it was a runner. I repeated that, although the previous administration, like the Unionists, had had doubts about Mitchell chairing strand 2, I had thought his performance in practice had set substantive fears to rest. That was why we had suggested the fudge in the way that we had. It was true that the Prime Minister had agreed to Mitchell's insistence on proper

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authorisation and continuity in strand 2 if he was to agree to the idea of joint chairmen.

Trimble left it at that, but made clear that the position was not satisfactory, and it was causing him problems with some of his people. He added that there were still difficulties on the procedural motion - Reg Empey was drafting some further changes for Paul Murphy to look at. He thought the problems were soluble. Meanwhile, he had been surprised that he had not been able to get any clear answers, from Mitchell or anyone else, about how business in the three strands would actually be done. This was rather worrying.

Comment

As expected, there is plenty of devil in the detail, but Trimble was not in too bad a mood at the end of the day, despite his complaints. Although clearly unhappy about the chairmanships point, he did not suggest that it was a deal-breaker, and was relatively restrained. At least the problem is now explicit with him. Let us see how this develops. It may be necessary for the Prime Minister to talk to him again at some stage on this point - the Prime Minister will be robust that it was understood from the beginning that Mitchell was likely to take on the task in substance. Meanwhile his suggestion for Mitchell to take on the Business Committee should at least be looked at. It would also be helpful if Mitchell could be persuaded to be less explicit on the point and simply let the situation develop as everyone expects.

You may also like to reflect on Trimble's point about Paisley. The Prime Minister will find it difficult to fit in a meeting with him in the next two or three weeks, but could perhaps speak to him on the phone. Could Dr. Mowlam get in touch with him and offer a meeting as a first step?

I am copying this letter to John Grant (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), Jan Polley (Cabinet Office), Sir John Kerr (Washington) and Veronica Sutherland (Dublin).


JOHN HOLMES

Ken Lindsay, Esq.,
Northern Ireland Office.

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