

CONFIDENTIAL



10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA

File F Trimble 5 Jan
bcc JEH
JPO
AC
PB
SUBJECT
MASTER

Filed on:

From the Principal Private Secretary

5 January 1998

Dear Ken,

MEETING WITH THE UUP, 5 JANUARY

David Trimble and John Taylor called on the Prime Minister this afternoon. The meeting had been originally intended to be private, but John Taylor, supposedly inadvertently, revealed to the press that he was coming to London today, and the rest followed automatically. The meeting lasted almost 90 minutes. The atmosphere was good, with both Trimble and Taylor seeming in good humour. Jonathan Powell, Alastair Campbell and I were present on our side.

After apologising for the leak of the meeting, Trimble said that there was a serious problem within the loyalist groups, particularly after the murder of Billy Wright. The Irish release of prisoners, without warning, had had a major impact, but the discontent had been building up for some time. David Ervine was adamant that the PUP would not be there when the talks resumed, but it was not clear how far this was for effect. Another factor which had affected loyalist sentiment was the Irish government's protection of Sinn Fein at the conclusion of the talks before the Christmas break. He also suspected that the DUP were working hard on the paramilitaries to turn them away from the talks, although he had no direct evidence of this. Meanwhile, the INLA were boasting to journalists that they would attack another important loyalist in Belfast before too long.

Taylor echoed this account, referring also to a general feeling that economically, socially and politically everything was going the way of the nationalists. However, it was still his impression that the leaderships of both loyalist parties wanted to stay in the talks if they could.

The Prime Minister said that we could look for a better balance on confidence-building measures, but this was always difficult. We certainly could not stop people killing each other if they wanted to. But recent developments simply reinforced his desire to push on with the process. It would be madness to allow

CONFIDENTIAL

Faxed - 200
ren.

CONFIDENTIAL

- 2 -

extremist killings to derail the process. The single biggest confidence-building measure for the unionist community would be evidence that the process was leading in an acceptable direction. Trimble agreed, but commented that the process was inevitably vulnerable to events. And we had to recognise that there had been a good deal of loyalist sympathy for Billy Wright, even if most people had disagreed with him politically. Taylor added that it was not right to be too pessimistic. Nearly all the parties were committed to the process and wanted it to go on.

The Prime Minister continued that the best way forward, in his view, was to put draft Heads of Agreement on the table quickly. He hoped Trimble could take forward negotiations with the Irish and the SDLP. But there was a difficult question about who could best table a draft. The UUP and SDLP together might be best. Trimble said that he had taken McMichael through our draft, and asked him whether such a draft would be helpful. McMichael had said that it would. He might do the same thing with Ervine, although there was always suspicion about the links between the PUP and republicans. As far as procedure was concerned, he thought that by far the best thing was if the two governments, the UUP and the SDLP tabled a draft together. If this was not possible, HMG might do it. But this would raise problems about Irish/nationalist reaction. In any case, it would be best to avoid the two governments tabling anything. The Prime Minister commented that what the present government were proposing seemed to him a good deal more acceptable to unionists than the Joint Framework Document, which he had been reading again over Christmas. Trimble agreed. That was why he was staying in the process, and why he would not have been prepared to do the same for the last government. He raised the issue of Sinn Fein's reaction to a draft Heads of Agreement and whether the Irish would continue to protect them. The Prime Minister said that the Irish had told us that they had not wanted to isolate Sinn Fein over Christmas, but recognised that Sinn Fein would have to face up to the facts sooner or later. Trimble said that the Irish had said similar things to them. There had also been the question of an Army Executive Council meeting the day after the talks ended. The UUP would be meeting the Irish again on Wednesday afternoon, and he would be ready to negotiate with them about Heads of Agreement. But this raised the question of how to deal with the SDLP in terms of substance and timing.

The Prime Minister said that the SDLP had not seen our draft, although he had talked it through with Hume. On the North/South front, he had been encouraged to find that there seemed to be a consistency of views between the UUP and the Irish about the North/South body itself not having executive powers, but bodies underneath it being able in principle to have such powers. Trimble agreed that what the Irish appeared to be saying was acceptable to them in principle, although there were difficult details like the Irish wish to have half a dozen bodies in

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

- 3 -

place immediately. Such bodies could only be justified if there was a practical need for them in specific areas.

The Prime Minister asked whether the UUP could accept our draft Heads of Agreement as a basis for negotiations. Trimble said that they could, as long as a reference was added to the Council on North South Cooperation (and he did not like the word Council) being there "to consult on matters of mutual benefit", at the end of the first sentence of the North/South tiret. For the rest, they could also accept a reference to a "balanced" constitutional understanding, to take account of the Irish desire for change to the British constitution. On the constitutional side, what the Irish had told them at their latest meeting had seemed broadly acceptable, except for the idea of Irish unity as an "objective". But he would want to see text before coming to a final view. The Irish had also confirmed that they were ready to be open minded about an East/West umbrella. So he had been pleasantly surprised, although he recognised that the North/South issues would remain difficult. He feared that, in fact, the SDLP might be more difficult. There was evidence, for example, from a private conversation recently between Adams and a journalist friend, that Hume was avoiding committing himself to an Assembly to suit Sinn Fein. This had been Hume's position in 1992 as well. This could be worrying.

This was followed by a discussion about how to engage the SDLP, and the right timing for this. It was agreed that it was most important to get the Irish government on board first, but that contacts should be made quickly with the SDLP too. The Prime Minister said he would talk to both Ahern and Hume on 6 January, to encourage them to be forthcoming in discussions with the UUP. Trimble said he would also try to talk to Ahern, and ensure that feelers were put out to Hume, Mallon and Durkan.

The Prime Minister went back to how a draft might be introduced into the talks. Might Mitchell do this? Taylor was doubtful. Mitchell attracted suspicion in the unionist community, and it would be much better for the two governments, the UUP and SDLP to do it.

The Prime Minister commented that negotiations with the SDLP about a text could be difficult and protracted. He wondered whether they could be short circuited in some way via the Irish, so that the SDLP only needed to sign up in broad terms. Trimble commented that he certainly would not wish to bounce the SDLP, as the UUP had been bounced in the past. I commented that there was an obvious tension between the desire to get a draft tabled quickly, and the desire to have the SDLP signed up as one of the sponsors. I also warned that getting the Irish and the SDLP to negotiate on the basis of our draft would be far from easy. Although the Irish had said they had no basic objections to our draft, despite some

CONFIDENTIAL

Temporarily retained

**THIS IS A COPY. THE ORIGINAL IS
CONFIDENTIAL
- 4 -
RETAINED UNDER SECTION 3 (4)
OF THE PUBLIC RECORDS ACT**

obvious omissions, this did not mean that they would find it easy to negotiate on the basis of it.

The Prime Minister repeated that he was extremely keen to see something tabled quickly, on 12 January if at all possible. Trimble echoed this urgency. The Prime Minister continued that he would make clear to Ahern and Hume that he saw the only practical way of doing this as being through using our draft as a basis for discussion. Of course the Irish and SDLP were bound to propose amendments. But he would draw Ahern's attention to the huge advantages of the breakthrough which would be represented by an accord on Heads of Agreement, even if the text was less than ideal from their point of view.

The Prime Minister went on to say that the process was not being helped by constant criticism of Dr Mowlam by the UUP. Trimble said that he was himself trying to avoid being over critical, although things like her decision not to visit Markethill after the bomb there, contrasted with her readiness to visit South Armagh with Mallon and make sympathetic noises about watchtowers, made criticism hard to avoid.

Taylor added that, once confidence had been lost, it was hard to regain.

Trimble went back to confidence-building measures. The most important thing was to avoid adding to the list of concessions to the nationalists. He was for example very worried that the Government were going to announce a further full enquiry into Bloody Sunday. That would go down very badly. The Prime Minister said he was keeping a close eye on this, and was aware of the desire of many people to avoid another large scale enquiry.

Trimble went on that proposed changes to the RUC were also very sensitive, and had a major knock-on effect in the unionist community through 10,000 Protestant members of the RUC and their extended families. He was particularly concerned about the plans for so-called community policing, which would be effectively giving status to local paramilitaries in their areas. He thought some NIO officials had this in mind. A very close eye should be kept on this. There were also difficulties with the Police Bill currently going through the Commons and with the proposed Select Committee inquiry into the RUC, where the Committee's main adviser was a mouthpiece for an academic called Brogden (?), who was effectively an adviser to the Provisionals. Again, a close eye on this was needed.

The Parades Bill was also very worrying. Some concessions had been made to the UUP, but UUP concerns should still be listened to more carefully. The Government would never be able to find a credible Protestant to replace Roy Magee,

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

- 5 -

and the Commission could be heading for disaster through a clash with the loyalists in the summer. Unionists could not accept that the Commission was balanced, when John Hume's election agent was on it. The prospects for this year's marching season could be grim, even if there was a settlement and a referendum, because the republican rejectionists, of whom there were bound to be some at least, would use the parades issue to stir up trouble.

Trimble referred finally to major concern about the corrupt Northern Ireland voting register and widespread electoral malpractices by Sinn Fein. This was an urgent issue in the context of a referendum, and one about which the SDLP were even more worried. It would be difficult to challenge the new register effectively, and it was already too late to produce new ID cards to prevent fraud involving medical cards without photos. But the electoral office should at least be given more resources to tackle the problems, rather than being cut, as it had been in recent years. There were also some good people in the electoral office, not including its head, whose views should be listened to.

The Prime Minister said that he would keep a close eye on all these issues. He could see the problems of perception they caused. But he continued to believe that, at the end of the process, the people with the real presentational problem would be the nationalists. There had been a need to give them something now, against the day when the balance tilted heavily against them. Trimble said that he could see the argument, but people in Northern Ireland more widely could not. Jeffrey Donaldson was drawing up a memorandum on existing CBMs – what had gone right and what had gone wrong. He would let the Prime Minister have this soon.

The meeting concluded with anecdotes from Trimble and Taylor about the Maze and failure to use metal detectors there, and jokey references to conspiracy theories which were already running riot about official Government involvement in Billy Wright's death. The general point was that the NIO controlled everything that went on in the Maze.

Comment

This was a good meeting in the circumstances. Trimble accepted that he should now try to negotiate an acceptable draft Heads of Agreement with the Irish and the SDLP, with help from us. Both he and Taylor seemed ready to engage positively and urgently in this process. There are obvious difficulties in this, not least getting the Irish/SDLP to negotiate on the basis of our draft rather than their own, but there is certainly encouragement to be drawn from the UUP approach.

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

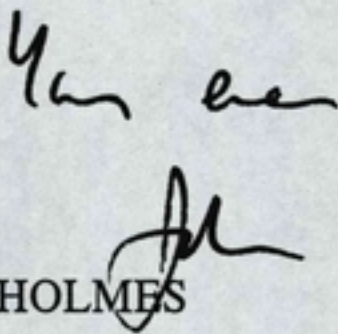
- 6 -

The Prime Minister is likely to phone Ahern and Hume tomorrow morning. I will be in touch separately about any particular points you think he should make.

I have kept Teahon abreast of developments through the day, and warned him both that the Prime Minister and Trimble will want to speak to Ahern (who is on holiday in Spain), and that the UUP will want to negotiate with the Irish on the basis of our draft Heads of Agreement, which we have given to them. Teahon took the news calmly, but said that the Irish would also have their draft Heads of Agreement, with appropriate commentary, ready to give to the UUP. They will also have some texts on constitutional and North/South issues, although they might not leave these with the UUP. Teahon incidentally confirmed, without prompting from me, that there could be a problem with the SDLP about references to an Assembly.

Teahon also gave me the Irish gameplan. They believed that the Prime Minister and Taoiseach should issue a joint statement on, say, Friday, to set the tone for the resumption of the talks, stressing in particular the urgency of progress. In addition to their talks with the UUP, the Irish would talk generally to the SDLP and Sinn Fein, without showing them any drafts, to prepare them for tabling of draft Heads of Agreement in a couple of weeks time. They believed that Mitchell should do the tabling, and that the parties should then take note of it as the basis for further negotiation. After that, they remained attracted by a Lancaster House model for negotiation, with the parties together for at least a week. Teahon will send me a draft for the proposed joint statement tomorrow.

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


JOHN HOLMES

Ken Lindsay Esq
Northern Ireland Office

CONFIDENTIAL