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From the Principal Private Secretary

23 January 1998

Dee Hen,

CONVERSATION WITH DAVID TRIMBLE, 23 JANUARY

The Prime Minister spoke to David Trimble on the telephone this afternoon. Trimble began by saying that the UFF statement had made it very difficult to imagine the UDP staying in the talks. He was sorry about this, since he believed McMichael was genuine, and not involved in violence in any way.

The Prime Minister said that it was important that, whatever we did, we did not set precedents which we would regret in relation to Sinn Fein at a later stage. Trimble agreed, and commented that the IRA had already gone back to violence in practice, as the Chief Constable had suggested. The Prime Minister asked whether, if the UDP had to leave the talks, the PUP would necessarily follow. Trimble said that this was not certain. At present, the UVF were the only paramilitary in the province not involved in violence (although he noted that some powergel explosive had been found that day, and he thought only the UVF had this). However, if the UDP were expelled, all restraints on the UFF/UDA would go and everyone could get sucked into the resulting violence.

The Prime Minister said that the disquiet on the Republican side came from Sinn Fein having to face up to the reality of what the settlement would look like. The essential thing was to ensure that, if they fell out of the process, the Irish and the SDLP stayed with us. Trimble agreed this was crucial. The Prime Minister continued that he would talk to Hume, and would also be trying to move the process on as fast as possible. But there was one point Sinn Fein had made, about their inability to communicate with the UUP, which worried him. As Trimble knew, his strategy had been to ensure Sinn Fein had no good excuses for going back to violence. It would be tremendously helpful, and would knock away Sinn Fein's last prop, if Trimble could talk to them. But he did not know whether this was possible.

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Trimble said that he understood the point, and had looked to see if he could find a way of doing this. However, every time he made a suggestion, his colleagues made clear this was not acceptable – even Ken Maginnis. He had thought of offering to discuss with Sinn Fein the Heads of Agreement paper, to ensure any meeting was on his agenda, not theirs. He might still do something like this, but it was difficult. He added that he would be seeing Father Alec Reid the following morning, as part of a continuing series of meetings, and would be trying to help defuse Sinn Fein's fear of a Northern Ireland Assembly as a return to the old days of Stormont.

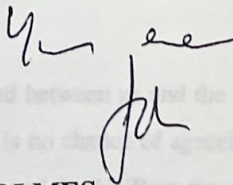
The Prime Minister repeated that it would be a great step forward if Trimble could find a way of talking to Sinn Fein. Meanwhile the Irish remained very jumpy for obvious reasons. Trimble acknowledged this, and said that Ahern had in fact been very good in what he had said, including in Londonderry that afternoon. He would try to put out a further line to him, perhaps at the beginning of next week. Trimble added that the Americans were also in touch with him – he expected to speak to Jim Steinberg later that evening.

The conversation concluded that the Prime Minister was looking forward to seeing Trimble in London next week.

Comment

No repeat of Trimble's line that he would have to leave the talks if the loyalists did, but he did not say the opposite either. He sounded helpful about talking to Sinn Fein but I doubt will do anything. Nevertheless the UUP could still edge closer to direct engagement in the talks.

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



JOHN HOLMES

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