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File F UKUP VLB



10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA

SUBJECT
MASTER

From the Principal Private Secretary

15 January 1998

Filed on:

Dear Gen,

MEETING WITH THE UKUP, 15 JANUARY

Robert McCartney, Conor Cruise O'Brien, Cedric Wilson and Patrick Roche called on the Prime Minister for 30 minutes this morning. Dr. Mowlam and Paul Murphy were also there.

McCartney said that it would come as no surprise to the Prime Minister that he continued to believe that the present peace process would cause cataclysmic trouble. He was not opposed to peace in Northern Ireland, but the present talks were a charade. The paramilitaries were still there, despite beatings and shootings on an increasing scale. The culmination had been Dr. Mowlam's dreadful visit to the psychopathic murderers in the Maze. People were appalled by the corruption of the process. This would inevitably come home to roost. His particular question was whether the present Government were still committed to Irish unity. He had ten quotes from speeches since the Government had taken office which suggested they were.

The Prime Minister said this was not so, and hardly a fruitful line of argument. He was continuing the process begun by the previous Government and had set out his position on the issues in May, shortly after taking office. The Heads of Agreement document currently on the table would allow relations between Northern Ireland and the Republic to develop without any question of overriding the wishes of the majority.

McCartney said that the 1988 policy document had been detailed and clear. He had not seen any subsequent policy document which could be said to replace it. Conor Cruise O'Brien said that the British Government made joint statements with the Irish Government, knowing full well that the Irish Government were

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- 2 -

committed to a united Ireland. McCartney said that the Heads of Agreement referred to a North-South Council. Ahern had said this would be an independent, free-standing body with executive powers and not accountable to anyone else. This showed the true nature of the document. David Trimble said that it would be subordinate to the East-West Assembly. The people of Northern Ireland needed to know the truth.

The Prime Minister said that the Heads of Agreement document was quite clear that the North-South Council was accountable to the Northern Ireland Assembly and could only take decisions where the Assembly was prepared for it to do so. The UKUP would understand these issues better if they were in the talks.

McCartney made clear this was out of the question. The talks were simply an exercise in conflict resolution with terrorists. The same group who had tried to kill the British Cabinet in 1984 and attacked Downing Street in 1991 had been allowed through the front door in 1997. Conor Cruise O'Brien said that these people would never accept anything less than a united Ireland, and their ceasefire would end this year. What would the Prime Minister do then? The Prime Minister said that if the paramilitaries went back to violence, the rule of law would be enforced. The purpose of the peace process was to establish whether they could be moved away from violence.

Cedric Wilson asked whether the Government had a plan B if they did go back to violence. Would the Government talk to the parties outside the process, even small ones? Meanwhile, the Government should understand clearly that Trimble had no mandate for his present participation in the talks, since he had gone against everything in his Manifesto. Moreover, he could not deliver the Unionist electorate in a referendum. A 51 per cent majority in such a referendum would be no good. The latest opinion polls suggested that 94 per cent of Unionists were opposed to cross-border bodies.

The Prime Minister said that he could not see what was wrong with cross-border co-operation, on a voluntary basis, where it made sense. McCartney said that there was no need for such arrangements, and they would be unprecedented in Europe. Unionists would be in an automatic minority in any North-South body. There were proper international arrangements for the treatment of minorities in neighbouring countries. Two essential rules were that borders should be recognised and that the country of origin should not interfere in the internal affairs of the other country. Successive Governments in Northern

RESTRICTED

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- 3 -

Ireland had allowed a foreign government to interfere. Conor Cruise O'Brien added that the Irish Government saw any North-South body as simply a first instalment on the way to Irish unity. The Prime Minister repeated that he could see nothing wrong with cross-border bodies, as set out in the Heads of Agreement.

McCartney went back to the 1988 Labour statement. Dr. Mowlam handed over material to demonstrate that it was no longer relevant. The Prime Minister repeated that there was no point in raising this. The present Government were not committed to it, any more than they were committed to other Labour policy statements from 1988.

McCartney said that it was clear that the Government were ready to abandon sovereignty over Northern Ireland, because they were ready to abandon Article 75 of the Government of Ireland Act. There were Articles in the Scotland and Wales legislation reserving ultimate sovereignty to Westminster. Why was nothing similar envisaged for Northern Ireland? The Prime Minister said that the situation was different. We wanted to achieve a settlement where both communities could live together peacefully. The key was the consent principle, which was after all a Unionist principle. The Irish Government were now signed up to it.

McCartney repeated that the Government were simply trying to negotiate with terrorists, and would give them anything they wanted in order to protect the British mainland. The Prime Minister said that he was used to his motives being impugned. But he was simply trying to make sense of the situation. McCartney said that the Government's approach would not work. It was based upon deception and the deliberate use of words to obfuscate reality. This would all come out in the end. He had never been involved in violence himself, was not sectarian in approach, was not a member of any loyalist order, and would love to see a peace process he could support. But the present process would only do damage. The Government's approach would come home to roost with a vengeance.

The Prime Minister said that we would have to wait to see how the process resolved itself. He hoped the UKUP would understand that his motives were sincere.

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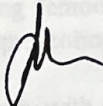
- 4 -

DECLARATION

Comment:

A pretty depressing performance by McCartney and his colleagues. The atmosphere remained remarkably reasonable in the circumstances. As usual, the UKUP had nothing constructive whatever to offer. They left behind the attached letter.

I am copying this letter to Jan Polley (Cabinet Office).

Yours sincerely


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