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Filed on:

From the Private Secretary

17 February 1998

See her,

CONVERSATION WITH THE TAOISEACH,
17 FEBRUARY

The Prime Minister and the Taoiseach spoke, at the Taoiseach's request, for about 15 minutes late this morning, following a letter to the Prime Minister from the Taoiseach (copy attached). They then spoke a second time shortly after 1400.

The Taoiseach said that he was trying everything to resolve the present situation, and being bombarded with complaints from all quarters. The Prime Minister said it was very difficult. He had seen the Taoiseach's letter. He would dearly love to find a way out, and would have been ready to bend most rules if necessary. If Sinn Fein had been prepared to use words like those proposed at the beginning, without it appearing that they had been dragged out of them, it might have helped. But if Sinn Fein were not expelled now, our own position would be more or less untenable, and the Unionists would walk away from the talks. They might even walk away if Sinn Fein were only expelled for a short period. The problem was that everyone believed that the IRA had been involved in the murders. We were ready to look at anything which might provide a way out, but if the Unionists left the talks, we might never get them back in again.

The Taoiseach said that he had taken this kind of line all weekend, but opinion in Northern Ireland in particular was very hostile to expelling Sinn Fein, for example the line in the latest edition of the *Irish News*. Others like Des Wilson, who had always been opposed to the IRA, were saying that it was wrong to rely on the words of the RUC to throw out Sinn Fein. There were threats to cut all contact with the Irish Government and parties in the South. But his biggest worry was that, in the view of the Garda and Irish intelligence, if Sinn Fein were expelled even for a short period, that would mean a return to war.

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This would not be the policy of Sinn Fein themselves, but of the 32 counties people. In other words, there would be effectively a take-over by the militarists. This was not so much what they were hearing from Sinn Fein, but their own security assessment, which had strengthened in the last day or two. He had been telling Adams before that the two Governments had to stick together and that he did not want to lose the Unionists out of the process. But he feared that, if Sinn Fein were thrown out, we might get the worst of all worlds. He wondered whether the Unionists would see merit in any wording in a statement by Sinn Fein.

The Prime Minister said that he had difficulty in seeing what such words would be, particularly when Sinn Fein had not, even in the latest version, condemned the murders. If there were a real break between Sinn Fein and the IRA, that would be different, but there seemed to be no evidence of that.

The Taoiseach suggested that there was some movement in that direction, in that the 32 counties people were heading in one direction, while most of the Republican movement wanted to remain political. The Prime Minister repeated that, if there were serious evidence that Sinn Fein were prepared to break with the men of violence, that might make a difference, though even then the Ulster Unionists would no doubt be unimpressed. He did not see how we could convince the Unionists that Sinn Fein should not be expelled, short of clear evidence of a Sinn Fein break with the IRA.

The Taoiseach accepted that we would have to carry the Unionists with us. He wondered whether stronger wording about the choice between politics and violence might help, or perhaps a reference to Sinn Fein's readiness, if violence continued, to break with the men of violence.

The Prime Minister said he would rack his brains, and he and the Taoiseach should speak again later. He did not think just a form of words would do the trick without some genuine reality of a break behind it. We would be in a very difficult situation if we lost the Unionists, and they were seen to be justified in walking out.

The Taoiseach said that, while not wanting to defend the murders, there was a feeling among Nationalists that there had not been a huge return to violence, given the provocation there had been.

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The Prime Minister said he understood the point, but if we let the Republicans get away with it this time, they would be encouraged to continue with a twin track approach.

The Taoiseach said that he worried for his part that if Sinn Fein were expelled, they would not come back in. But he acknowledged that, if the Unionists thought we were trying to find a way round Sinn Fein's expulsion, they would go bananas. He agreed that both he and the Prime Minister should rack their brains and speak again later. The Prime Minister repeated that real evidence of a break would be needed, and even then, it was difficult to hold out much real hope of convincing all concerned.

When they spoke for the second time, the Prime Minister said he had thought very hard since their first conversation but did not have much to offer. He feared that if we went down a road of negotiating words with Sinn Fein, we would find it more difficult to persuade them to accept the inevitability of expulsion. He warned that bipartisanship might go if we kept Sinn Fein in.

The Taoiseach said he had reached a similar conclusion that there was no alternative, and that it was now best to get on with it, although he had heard Sinn Fein might seek an injunction, whatever that meant in this context. The Prime Minister said that if Sinn Fein were put out but it was clear they could come back in, and we could help them in the intervening period, that should help. But it would have to be very clear that there could be no return to violence of any kind in the meantime. He was prepared to lean on the UUP to live with a short period, but would have no credibility in asking them to accept non-expulsion. It was vital for the three governments to stick together, with the SDLP if possible.

The Taoiseach said that if the period of expulsion was short, it would be hard for them to argue that a return to violence was justified on that basis. He was now ready to go ahead – as he had been since Thursday night. He asked whether the Prime Minister was still convinced by the evidence of IRA involvement. The Prime Minister said it was, unfortunately, overwhelming. He and Dr. Mowlam had both looked hard and would have loved to find holes in it. They could not.

The Taoiseach concluded that there was no choice but to get on with the process. They might not be able to get Sinn Fein to say that they were ready to accept it, but they would have to say it themselves otherwise, to stop the

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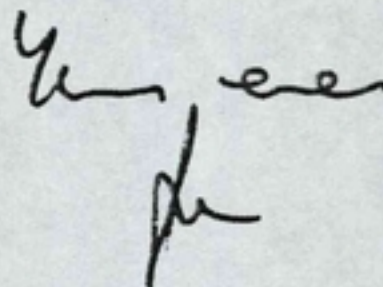
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snowball of trouble gathering. As it was, he feared rioting in the North when the decision became clear.

Comment

The Taoiseach was as firm in the second conversation as he was uncertain in the first. The tone of both discussions was entirely friendly. We continue to owe him a lot.

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

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'John Holmes', with a stylized flourish at the end.

JOHN HOLMES

Ken Lindsay Esq
Northern Ireland Office

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