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 Maple + Sutherland
 cc FB

From the Private Secretary

26 January 1998

Dee hen,

CONVERSATION WITH THE TAOISEACH

The Prime Minister and the Taoiseach spoke this evening for about 20 minutes at 10 o'clock.

The Prime Minister began by apologising for the problems about the Strand II Paper. Ahern, who seemed remarkably relaxed in the circumstances, said he thought the day had gone well from the UDP point of view. The two governments had been seen to be fair and firm, but to keep the door open. On the papers, the parties were expecting joint papers on Strands 2 and 3. There was no problem on Strand 3, but he understood there were difficulties about commitment to the Framework Document in Strand 2, and that the Unionists were very alarmed. The SDLP were of course worried on the other side. The paper made clear that the parties could put forward their own ideas. But if the Framework Document was left out, it would feed the Nationalist fear that the Propositions Paper had completely overtaken the Framework Document. Putting it in would give a bit of balance to the Nationalists.

The Prime Minister said that he had come to this difficulty a little late in the day. He feared that the UUP had not been prepared sufficiently for a text on these lines. He had no problem himself with the Government saying it was firmly committed to the Framework Document. But tabling the paper tomorrow would cause Trimble to explode and could set the process back months. Given time, he might bring Trimble along to this point, but any short-term joy for the Nationalists tomorrow at the tabling of the paper was likely to be short-lived. If the SDLP and Sinn Fein needed something to make clear that the Framework Document was still there, he thought this could be done, although it would be difficult in the next couple of days. He did not want to undermine all the hard work on the Propositions Paper through Trimble blowing up tomorrow. He also had in mind that there could be an announcement later in the week which could

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be difficult for the Unionists. What mattered was the substance of what the parties could agree. Trimble had to be brought to accept Executive powers for North-South bodies. He thought he could do this, but Trimble required particularly careful handling, however irritating this might be.

Ahern asked what the Governments could do tomorrow. The Prime Minister suggested that the questions could be tabled, and we would say to the SDLP and Sinn Fein we would try to deliver a more acceptable document on Strand 2 in the next few days. He would have no difficulty in this being said to the SDLP and Sinn Fein.

Ahern said that the Unionist position could of course be a try-on - they were trying to stop the Framework Document appearing at all. The Prime Minister said that there was no doubt some of this, but his view was that Trimble was not just huffing and puffing. If he flounced out, tabling the paper would not have been worth it. He needed to see Trimble face to face and see if he could get something sorted out. He would make clear that we could not resile from the Framework Document but try to get him to agree to our saying this in a way which did not send Trimble up in smoke. Moreover, he wanted to get Trimble in a position where answers could be given, not just questions. Presentation was hugely important for Trimble, even more so than for the other parties, because of the brooding presence of Paisley and McCartney. Even if we survived tabling of a paper on present lines, he feared the substance would prove much more difficult. He realised that the Unionists could not get away with this the whole time, but he really feared the consequences of tabling tomorrow.

Ahern said that he hoped we could say the two governments were still working on a paper rather than that we could not agree on one. For that reason, he was not keen on tabling questions. The Prime Minister agreed, subject to any second thoughts he might have before the morning. But he hoped that too much press speculation about Trimble having trouble with reference to the Joint Framework Document could be avoided, since that would make him even more difficult to shift. But he understood how difficult it might be to control the press.

Ahern asked about Bloody Sunday, picking up the Prime Minister's hint earlier in the conversation. The Prime Minister said he was working very hard on this, though it was not easy. He went on that at some stage the process would have to be speeded up. We needed to get down to detail on Strand 2 and drive this through. Ahern agreed. The two governments should work up a proper

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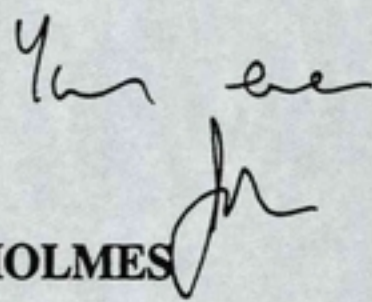
paper, even if there were square brackets in it. Otherwise, the process simply went up and down over a word here or there. The Prime Minister agreed.

The Prime Minister concluded that he would try to bring Trimble along, but it was a delicate operation. If he could not be brought along, the process would not work anyway. Ahern accepted this but said that fudge should be avoided the following day. There was no choice but to kick for touch for now, with the two governments agreeing a common line. Meanwhile, he hoped the Prime Minister would be able to say something about the Framework Document to the talks participants.

Comment

News of the revised text agreed with the Irish arrived too late for this conversation. But it would have made no difference. The Prime Minister believes he will need to talk Trimble through all this very carefully, if we are not to move backwards in the process.

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


JOHN HOLMES

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