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From the Principal Private Secretary

12 February 1998

See her.

CONVERSATION WITH THE TAOISEACH, 12 FEBRUARY

The Prime Minister and the Taoiseach spoke on the telephone this morning for some 10 minutes. The Prime Minister said that we had a serious problem with the latest killings in Northern Ireland. He was reluctant to get into a situation where Sinn Fein were thrown out of the talks, because of the possible implications. On the other hand, the IRA could not simply go back to killing people without anything happening. It was reasonably clear that the IRA were responsible for the drugs related killing, through their front organisation DAAD. That was bad enough, but was easier to handle in some ways because of the drugs context. The other murder was more difficult. The Chief Constable would say that he believed it to be the work of the IRA. There had been no statement from Sinn Fein or the IRA denying this or condemning it in any way, and the circumstantial evidence of IRA responsibility was obviously strong.

Ahern said that, in the absence of strong statements from Sinn Fein or the IRA, clearly we were in a very difficult situation. He had been taking the line in interviews the previous day that everybody had to be treated the same. When the Irish met McGuinness the day before, he had been very emphatic that a ceasefire held and would hold. But there had been no public statement. He asked whether the Chief Constable was about to go public.

The Prime Minister said that he would do so at some stage, but in any case he had told us his view and we could not ignore that. It would obviously be much easier if the killing was the work of mavericks. Ahern said that there was some feeling in Dublin that it could be the work of the 32 Counties Committee or Continuity IRA, but this was no more than suspicion.

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The Prime Minister said that if the IRA and Sinn Fein denied and condemned the murder, if it was seen as an isolated incident, and if there was some doubt about whether it was authorised or the work of mavericks, the problem would still be very difficult to deal with. The unionists would press very hard for Sinn Fein's expulsion. But it might be manageable. Otherwise, we could be quickly in a position where our hands were effectively tied. In any case, we could not allow a situation where the IRA thought they could "peel off at the edges".

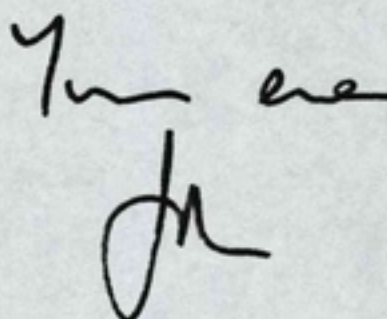
Ahern said that he would reflect on this, and wait to see whether anything happened today. He understood what the Prime Minister was saying. He repeated that McGuinness had been emphatic in private, but accepted that we needed something public. The Irish would try to achieve this. But at the end of the day, if the Governments were left with no option, they would have no option.

The conversation concluded with agreement to be in touch later in the day.

Comment

Ahern could not have been more reasonable. From separate conversations with Paddy Teahon, I think that the Irish have some hopes that the IRA or Sinn Fein will say something helpful in the course of today. But they cannot be sure – and it is likely to fall well short of what we want.

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



JOHN HOLMES

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