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**SUBJECT
MASTER** *LB*

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From the Principal Private Secretary

2 February 1998

*Dee Hen,***MEETING WITH DAVID TRIMBLE, 28 JANUARY**

The Prime Minister met David Trimble for 40 minutes privately in the House after PMQs. Paul Murphy joined the meeting for the last 10 minutes.

The Prime Minister regretted the misunderstanding about the Strand 2 paper, and exposed the dilemma between treating all parties equally and a particular understanding between the Government and the UUP. He understood why the UUP sought this, given the clear relationship of support between the Irish Government and the SDLP/Sinn Fein, whatever their detailed differences. He saw the case for it, given the UUP's problems of presentation, with the absence of Paisley and McCartney from the talks. But it was only possible if it was not evident to all. On the substance, he believed that the negotiations would in the end be about the Propositions paper. He needed to know the real UUP bottom line on Strands 2 and 3. Meanwhile the UUP's refusal to talk to Sinn Fein was giving Sinn Fein a useful propaganda tool. His own assessment was that Adams and some others wanted to come in from the cold and take a political path, though not at the cost of splitting the republican movement. But they had not yet prepared their supporters for the kind of solution likely to be on the table, which was why Propositions had caused them such difficulty. Overall, his wish remained to move quickly.

Trimble said that whatever the Irish Government had in the way of papers went straight to the SDLP and Sinn Fein. So the UUP was discriminated against if it could not see them. But the more fundamental problem was the NIO's insistence on a settlement based on the Framework Document or Frameworks Plus. This made him distrust the whole thrust of the Government's policy: NIO officials did not believe in the Union at all, and he was not sure about NIO ministers either.

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The Prime Minister said that he had not seen or heard any evidence to support such a view. And if people were constantly attacked, it was hardly surprising that close relations were hard to build. In any case the need was to look at the detail. On Strand 2, the vital lock for the Unionists was that nothing could happen except by agreement and within the mandate of the Northern Ireland Assembly. There was a problem about North-South bodies and executive powers but he was not sure how serious a point this was in reality. He thought Ahern had a pretty open mind and wanted a good relationship with Britain.

Trimble agreed. Some Irish officials were reasonable too. He thought the prospects of a deal with the present Irish Administration were brighter than under the last one. His problems were not with the Irish Government, but the way he had been double-crossed by the British Government. The Prime Minister said that his only aim was to reach a settlement which would offer sufficient comfort to the Unionists, while not provoking war from the nationalists. If the UUP and SDLP could work something out together that would be fine by us. Ahern's and SDLP views seemed reasonably close.

Trimble said he was ready to have one more go with the Irish and would also talk to the SDLP. His biggest worry remained the NIO. Were they pursuing the same objective? On Strand 2, he agreed that executive powers might at the end of the day be more a presentational problem than a point of substance, but there was a sticking point for him, which was the creation of some specific bodies as part of a settlement. He could not accept that, which was why he was so upset that the North-South paragraphs of Frameworks had been smuggled into the Strand 3 paper (I corrected him).

The Prime Minister repeated that he could not appear to resile from the Framework Document, even though it had been produced by the previous government. But it was not necessary to negotiate on the basis of it. Personally he did not care whether what was agreed was in line with the Framework Document or not. The important issue was the substance.

Trimble returned to the issue of talking to Sinn Fein. Adams was deliberately stepping up the pressure on him, because he knew Trimble was not far from doing it, and was trying to destabilise his leadership of the UUP. But he could not meet him unless it was on the right agenda. Even then Empey and Maginnis would be very unhappy. He had just had a letter from Adams, asking for a meeting. He would reply in a few days (which would be something),

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making clear that unless Sinn Fein could accept consent and negotiate on the basis of the Propositions paper a meeting was impossible. I said that the UUP could still do a lot more to engage with Sinn Fein in the talks. Trimble said they were moving in that direction. He might also say to McGuinness, at a suitable moment in the talks, that he would meet Sinn Fein if they accepted the consent principle. The Prime Minister said this would certainly help to put Sinn Fein more on the back foot.

Bloody Sunday/Firearms

The Prime Minister told Trimble, on Privy Council terms, of what he had decided and would be announcing. He would also talk about the need to remember the victims of violence. Did Trimble have any specific ideas on this point? Trimble did not react to the Bloody Sunday point directly, but said that the Bloomfield exercise had, typically, turned sour. He was proposing a memorial to all victims in Londonderry, with nothing for the members of the security forces who had made the ultimate sacrifice. He had also just heard from Adam Ingram that the NIO had gone back on what had been agreed over firearms. The review would lead to the withdrawal of PPWs. I queried this but Trimble was not in listening mode. The Prime Minister said he would look into this. He had never seen himself why there was a need to extend the British legislation to Northern Ireland, given the special circumstances. He would try to sort this out quickly.

Talks

Paul Murphy joined the discussion at this point, and there was a broad, good-humoured exchange about the talks prospects and Northern Irish politics. Trimble explained his relations with the PUP and his own party's political stance ("wet Tories"). He said more than once that he wanted Northern Irish politics to become like those in Scotland, and would therefore welcome the mainstream British parties mobilising in Northern Ireland, even though it would not necessarily be good for him. There had to be a move away from tribalism – he was for example trying to encourage more Catholics to join the UUP, albeit quietly.

Comment

Trimble was still angry, but less so than the previous day, and less insistent that all was lost. I am writing separately about how we can best handle

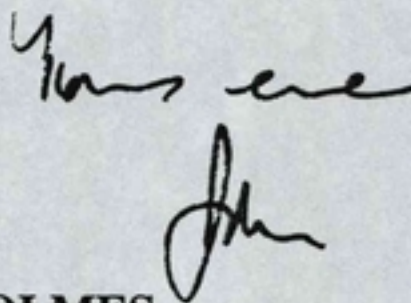
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the UUP in future. On firearms, we are trying to find an acceptable way through which will preserve the bulk of the work already done by the NIO. I will be in touch about this separately.

I am copying this only to Jan Polley (Cabinet Office) and would be grateful if its circulation could be restricted.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'John Holmes', written in a cursive style.

JOHN HOLMES

Ken Lindsay Esq
Northern Ireland Office

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