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10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AASUBJECT
MASTER

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From the Private Secretary

5 February 1998

See her.

TALKS WITH PRESIDENT CLINTON, 5 FEBRUARY: NORTHERN IRELAND

The Prime Minister's restricted talks with President Clinton began with a short discussion of Northern Ireland. I have recorded separately the discussions on Iraq and Iran. Clinton was accompanied by Vice President Gore, Madeleine Albright, Sandy Berger (NSC) and a note-taker. Jonathan Powell and I were also there, with John Sawers (Embassy) as note-taker.

The Prime Minister said that the task he faced was to work on the Unionists while keeping Sinn Fein in the peace process. There were tensions within Sinn Fein/IRA, and the organisation would be meeting in March, in effect to decide whether to stay in negotiations. We had got agreement from the Unionists to the Propositions document, which meant we were in business. But the process remained prey to the handful of extremists on both sides. He believed Adams and McGuinness did not want to go back to violence. But others in Sinn Fein/IRA did.

Clinton asked what would the reason be for a reversion to violence: was it that the deal would not be good enough? The Prime Minister thought the problem was more fundamental than that. Sinn Fein/IRA was both a political party and a terrorist organisation within which the use of violence was ingrained. Clinton agreed.

Berger asked whether there was scope for more action on the equality agenda, outside the talks. The Prime Minister said there was. It sometimes required difficult decisions from us, but we would do the right thing. The Bloody Sunday statement was an example. He added that we were working closely with Dublin. The European dimension helped. We now discussed a wide range of issues with the Irish Government of which Northern Ireland was only one.

The Prime Minister emphasised the importance of US influence on Sinn Fein. Clinton recognised this. He assumed that keeping the IRA from reverting to

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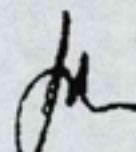
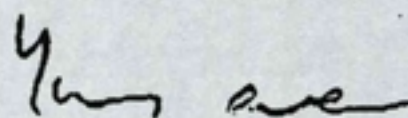
The Prime Minister emphasised the importance of US influence on Sinn Fein. Clinton recognised this. He assumed that keeping the IRA from reverting to violence was the most useful role the US could play. The Prime Minister agreed. A return to violence by Sinn Fein could lead to the collapse of the peace process, although we would try to keep it going nevertheless. Sinn Fein had to know that it would not be like last time, when the process had appeared stalled and they could claim some political legitimacy for breaking the ceasefire, however much the return to violence was unjustified. If they went back to violence now, there would be no such political legitimacy. That was an important pressure keeping Adams and McGuinness in the process.

Clinton said he would also continue "shmoozing" with Trimble. The Prime Minister said the problem Trimble faced was to advocate change while withstanding the pressures from within the Unionist community. We had to help him do that. But continued US contacts with Trimble were also helpful.

Comment

A very helpful recognition by Clinton, without prompting from us, of how he can be most useful.

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



JOHN HOLMES

Ken Lindsay Esq
Northern Ireland Office