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SUBJECT F.
Minister

Filed on

From the Private Secretary

21 November 1996

Dear Ken,

CALL BY THE UUP, 21 NOVEMBER

David Trimble, Ken Maginnis and Martin Smyth called on the Prime Minister in the House of Commons this afternoon for about an hour. Sir Patrick Mayhew and Michael Ancram were there on our side. Once again it was a discussion which hopped all over the place at different times, but I hope I have covered the main points.

After some discussion of the car bomb found outside the RUC headquarters in Londonderry, the Prime Minister said that the talks in Belfast were going through a sticky patch, as he had said publicly. We could be heading for a breakdown. If this happened, it was crucial that neither the British Government nor the Unionists were left holding the parcel. The UUP were crucial to progress, but it continued to look difficult to find a way round the present impasse. Meanwhile the UUP were aware of the initiative taken by Hume, and were no doubt concerned about it. But there was no change of policy on our side and no threat to the Unionist position.

The Prime Minister continued that Hume had consistently said that the IRA were ready to declare a new ceasefire, which Hume claimed would become permanent, if we would make a public statement of our policy, covering particularly decommissioning, time scale for the talks and confidence building measures, by which they meant prisoners. (Trimble interjected that Sinn Fein also wanted a change in policing.) We had always made clear that we would pay no price for a ceasefire, which should happen anyway, but that we were ready to restate our existing policy if that would help. There could be no question of paying a price following the betrayal of the last ceasefire. Nevertheless we had given Hume some examples of what we might say, and texts had gone backwards and forwards. (Trimble interjected again to say that O'hUiginn had been working closely with Hume and with the IRA.) Most recently we had told the Irish and the SDLP that if they wanted us to take

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seriously Sinn Fein's claims about readiness to declare another ceasefire, we needed to be clear about the language they would use, and would want it to cover issues such as permanence, the consent principle and parallel decommissioning. Another tactical device was of no interest to us and quite unacceptable.

The Irish had said they would go away and try their luck with Sinn Fein. It was now clear that they had not been able to get any satisfactory language out of them, although Sinn Fein had continued to say they would declare a ceasefire in the right circumstances, "with a ribbon round it". We had made clear this was not good enough. It had not come as a surprise, indeed it was what we had expected all along. However, it left us with the problem of how to bring the exercise to a conclusion with the blame lying where it should. We were, therefore, looking at our possible statement again and working particularly on the terms of entry for talks for Sinn Fein following a ceasefire. It would not be proper to give a text to the UUP while we had not given it to Hume, but we would run through it in some detail. The Prime Minister then went through the attached speaking note carefully.

The Prime Minister made clear in doing so that our ideas about the process to manage the time after a ceasefire were not yet fixed, and we were open to UUP suggestions. He underlined that any discussions we might have with Sinn Fein after a ceasefire would be to test what assurances they could give about a ceasefire, not substantive political discussions. The point of getting them to commit themselves early on, outside the negotiations, to the Mitchell principles was to tie them down to a commitment to exclusively peaceful means. We had not laid down a specific time period for this process, not least because the UUP had made clear they did not want this. But it was bound to be a significant period of time during which we would be testing whether IRA/Sinn Fein deeds matched their words. Sinn Fein would not be in the talks until they met these criteria.

The Prime Minister concluded that we proposed to give our new text to John Hume soon, and then make it public.

Trimble did not comment directly on any of this, but asked about the content of the rest of our proposed statement. This seemed to be more important for the IRA than the entry terms. The Prime Minister repeated that he could not give Trimble a text but he ran through very quickly the issues covered in the statement, and offered at a later stage in the discussion that Michael Ancram would go through the draft statement in more detail with him. Trimble said this would be useful. He asked whether the consent principle figured in the statement. The Prime Minister said that it was implicit, but not explicit.

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The Prime Minister said that we did not expect our text to be well received by the nationalist side and therefore did not believe, sadly but unsurprisingly, that it would lead to a new ceasefire. But it was of course still possible that the IRA would declare a new tactical ceasefire anyway. Trimble commented that he expected a new ceasefire in the New Year in any case, to trap Hume electorally and wrong-foot the British Government and the Unionists. Maginnis asked whether the Irish were taking a similar line to Hume or some variant of it. The Prime Minister said that the Irish did not seem to be playing games. They feared that if we closed off the option of immediate entry to the talks by Sinn Fein, this would inevitably lead to a downward spiral to the full resumption of violence on both sides. They therefore wanted us to swallow hard and let Sinn Fein in. We had told them this simply was not credible politically here. The Irish knew they were on weak ground, and knew that any new ceasefire could only be tactical. But they believed more politically inclined members of the IRA/Sinn Fein wanted to do a deal, and could lose out to the military wing if we did not offer them something. Our line was harder than that. This had led to some pretty difficult exchanges with the Irish.

Maginnis said that this was the same old story with the Irish. But he was concerned about the time scale of a breakdown in talks. He hoped it would not be too soon, since there was still a lot of work to be done to prepare the position with the international community. An independent commission working away to tackle decommissioning and de-escalate tension would be very helpful in this respect. The Prime Minister agreed. We had been going through the process with Hume to ensure that, if there was an early breakdown, we did not get the blame, as much as to see where it might lead. As far as decommissioning was concerned, we believed in parallel decommissioning, which we saw as a reasonable hurdle, not an insuperable one for Sinn Fein. Our new proposals on the independent commission had gone down very badly with the Irish. Sir Patrick Mayhew confirmed this, but suggested that the Irish might be brought round. For the moment, they were terrified that if they agreed to this move, the Ulster Unionists would simply demand more. We hoped that if we could resolve the terms of entry problem, this might help. Michael Ancram commented that the Irish had been a little taken aback by the talks between the Ulster Unionists and the SDLP - they could not be more SDLP than the SDLP.

Trimble said that there had been different bilaterals with the SDLP over the week, although he had only attended the first. He had detected something of an opening in their arguments, which in fact led in the direction of an independent commission. But the SDLP too were worried about what might be on the UUP shopping list next. They also did not want to underwrite the UUP view of when decommissioning should start. But they did not need to do that. Equally, the UUP did not need to abandon their own view. It would be helpful if he could see our ideas on paper, since the small print was always important.

Michael Ancram said that he would be happy to do this at the planned bilateral on Monday.

Maginnis returned to a possible breakdown in the talks. He attached great importance to the Independent Commission in this respect. For the moment he sensed that both the Government and the Unionists were running scared of what the Irish/Nationalist propaganda machine might do. Experience suggested these fears might be well-founded. A Commission would be most helpful in this respect.

Smyth asked various questions, which demonstrated he had not understood fully what had been said. He asked in particular about the possibility of officials and Ministers meeting Sinn Fein after a ceasefire. On being reassured that officials would precede Ministers, Smyth said that he did not find this reassuring. Officials tended to say things to Sinn Fein they were not supposed to. This led to later charges of betrayal by Sinn Fein.

Maginnis asked about Loyalist attitudes, following the Prime Minister's meeting with them the previous day. The Prime Minister said that they had given the sense that they wanted to keep the ceasefire going, and that it was a little stronger than before. There had been some discussion of small concessions to prisoners, which would apply across the board. The Loyalists were concerned about the prospect of the talks breaking down, and had been frank about Unionist politics. They could see the difficulty the UUP were in because of the challenge from Paisley and McCartney on the right. They had no sympathy whatsoever with Paisley and McCartney, but seemed much more ready to work with the UUP.

Maginnis went off at a tangent. It was quite possible that the IRA would declare a ceasefire. They could even label it permanent in Northern Ireland itself, although not on the Mainland. Even if they ceased physical terrorism altogether, there would be a move to social/economic terrorism. The recent boycotts were a precursor of this. He was sure Sinn Fein would move in this direction. The Government needed to be ready to counter this. It would be a clever political move of Adams to bring the present classic terrorist campaign to an end for good, but move on to this different territory.

Trimble asked about the American position. He would be going to Washington in ten days' time and hoped to see me before then. The Prime Minister said that the Americans had been surprisingly quiet recently. When he had spoken to President Clinton a few days ago, he had not engaged at all, despite the Prime Minister's deliberately downbeat presentation.

Trimble returned again to the proposed Government statement on Hume/Adams. When did we propose to make it public? The Prime Minister

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said that he wanted to move quickly, and he hoped it would be in the public domain in the middle to end of next week. But he could not promise. He had not discussed some aspects of it with NI colleagues yet. Trimble asked how the Irish would react. The Prime Minister said that they would almost certainly be negative, although it was just possible they would decide it was the best they were going to get and therefore run with it. Trimble commented that if they reacted negatively, this could prevent a deal on decommissioning. Michael Ancram said that this was possible. But if the Irish and the SDLP lost the Hume/Adams initiative, would they want to lose the talks as well?

... The meeting concluded at that point, since the Prime Minister had to leave to meet the Moderator of the Church of Scotland. There was therefore no time to discuss what the press line would be. The disadvantages of this were immediately demonstrated by Trimble's suggestion to the press that he expected a Government statement next week. We have tried to damp down this speculation, by saying that no Parliamentary statement is planned. I attach the press line on which we have been drawing.

Comment: the tone of the meeting was friendly and positive. As on previous occasions, there was no obvious objection from the UUP side to what they were hearing, although they clearly have concerns, particularly about what might be in the rest of the statement. It will be important to set these fears at rest quickly.

I am copying this letter to William Ehrman (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), Jan Polley (Cabinet Office), Sir John Kerr in Washington and Veronica Sutherland in Dublin.

Yours

John

JOHN HOLMES

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