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FAKED

to N20 21/11/96

SUBJECT
MASTER

10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA

Filed on:

From the Private Secretary

21 November 1996

Dear Gen,

CALL BY PUP AND UDP, 20 NOVEMBER

Gary McMichael and John White of the UDP, and David Ervine and William Smith of the PUP, called on the Prime Minister for over an hour on 20 November. Sir Patrick Mayhew, Sir John Wheeler, Sir John Chilcot and Jonathan Stephens were there on our side. It was a good-tempered occasion, despite the gloom of the visitors about the immediate prospects. The discussion jumped about all over the place, but I have tried to record the main points reasonably systematically. As on the previous occasion, the Loyalists talked straight and sensibly. The extent of their denunciation of all the Unionist parties was striking.

McMichael began by asking about reported contacts between HMG and Sinn Fein, the prospects for a new ceasefire, and the state of the talks. The Prime Minister said we had no direct contacts with Sinn Fein. Nor did he see how we could have any, short of a ceasefire. No private deals were being struck. Of course we received messages from Sinn Fein. But we could not and would not negotiate with them. The talks were going through a bumpy patch, and would get nowhere unless all sides were ready to make concessions. We were not fixated by waiting for Sinn Fein. We would prefer the talks with them in, but they had excluded themselves. They could only come in after a new ceasefire and on genuinely democratic terms, not their terms. As far as a ceasefire was concerned, we did not see it as a likelihood, but it was a possibility. Our concern would be to ensure that we were not taken in again by a tactical ploy. In any case, Sinn Fein could not come into the talks immediately. We did not want to create a barrier they could not cross, but they would have to get over a reasonable barrier.

The Prime Minister continued that decommissioning was the other blockage to progress. Our view remained one of commitment to the Mitchell proposals. We would have preferred decommissioning to start before the talks, but we accepted that was not realistic. We also accepted that there was no realistic possibility of unilateral Loyalist decommissioning.

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Ervine commented that the Unionists were trying to create an insuperable barrier for Sinn Fein. But the Government's position was similar to that of the Loyalists. If Sinn Fein said the right words, they would be prepared to live with that for the moment and look at the deeds thereafter. There should be no repeat of 1994, when preparations for war had continued after a ceasefire. What was needed was "no initiation (ie no first strike), no preparation". (This formulation was repeated several times.) The Prime Minister agreed that the right words were essential to start with. But thereafter some verification that these words meant what they said was also essential.

McMichael said that it would have to be proven that Sinn Fein's commitments were genuine. The Loyalists did not insist on prior physical decommissioning - that would just be a deliberate deterrent to Sinn Fein. But Sinn Fein did need to pay a price. The 1994 experience, when planning and procurement had gone on after the ceasefire, should not be repeated. The Prime Minister said that if there was a ceasefire with the right words, but active preparation continued, the appropriate conclusions would have to be drawn, including for the talks.

Ervine asked whether HMG was challenging the IRA ideologically, for example over the consent principle. He would not expect them to agree, since weapons and the consent principle were all they had left to give up. But it was still worth trying. Meanwhile, he assumed "permanence" was still in our minds. The Prime Minister said that we had challenged them about consent - unsuccessfully so far. On permanence, we did not want to dance on the head of a pin about a word, when we knew the constitutional difficulties it involved for the IRA. But equally we could not accept a formula which allowed them to slip back to violence without clearly breaking their promises, and so being freely and publicly condemned by everyone. So, after all the bombs, they had to offer more than they had last time.

McMichael agreed with this position. White said that the UUP/DUP/UKUP desire to prevent any chance of Sinn Fein joining the talks was very dangerous. McMichael emphasised that the Loyalists wanted the republicans involved. Their threat could only be destroyed by bringing them into the political process. The republicans were now internally divided, but the Unionists were uniting them with their decommissioning proposals. The talks would never succeed finally without Sinn Fein. The Prime Minister commented that the republicans could never win politically or militarily. No British Government could ever give in to military violence. And politically the Union was absolutely secure through the triple lock. The more moderate republicans knew that a united Ireland was not attainable, but were looking for a way to ensure the nationalist community's interests were genuinely protected. We could offer these moderates something, while protecting the Union. The Government could facilitate such a deal, as could the Irish Government. But

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we could not impose one. Currently, Sinn Fein were under severe pressure. They needed to get into the talks. So we had to say to them that they could not get in without further movement on their part. Otherwise we would go on without them. But if they could come in on reasonable terms, they should be able to do so.

Ervine repeated that this attitude gave the Loyalists no difficulty. The problem lay with the Unionists - and we knew that the parliamentary position was bound to be a factor in the Government's thinking. Trimble had to find the guts to stand up to Paisley and McCartney, assuming that he wanted to do so. Sir Patrick Mayhew said that we believed Trimble did want the process to move forward, but Paisley and McCartney did not (though Robinson might). Trimble was obsessed about being outflanked on his right. Of course life would be easier for Trimble if Sinn Fein were not there, but he might not be determined to keep them out if his flank could be protected from Paisley. He certainly did not want to bring the process to an end.

Ervine said that the Loyalists were now gloomy about the talks, and had been warning publicly of the dangers. The talks could collapse - or perhaps be suspended - in a few days. The Prime Minister suggested that the Loyalists might make clear to the UUP that they would support them if the UUP took risks for peace. The Loyalist role had been constructive for the last few months. The DUP and UKUP were probably beyond the pale. Perhaps it was time to underpin the centre? McMichael said they had already played that role over Mitchell as Chairman. Ervine added that Trimble had severe internal problems too. Meanwhile, the people of Northern Ireland needed to be confronted with the truth - indeed they were crying out for it - and the UUP needed to give a lead. The key to progress lay through UUP/SDLP agreement. The Prime Minister should be tough with Trimble and break through his waffle. There could also be a public appeal to the UUP to save the process, as they had done before. White commented that the UUP front-line team was too thin in talent and too changeable, and Trimble was hardly ever there. This did not help.

There was some discussion of the electoral possibilities of the Loyalists and the UUP combining to defeat DUP/UKUP candidates. Ervine made clear that all things were possible, but it was too soon to take such decisions yet. He went on to repeat that someone had to stand up and take a lead. There had been some useful recent stirrings from the business community. The jobs issue was vital to remove alienation and Northern Ireland's benefit mentality. The Prime Minister agreed. The economic/investment opportunities for a genuinely peaceful Northern Ireland were huge.

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Prisoners

Asked by the Prime Minister to lead off, White referred to the problems of Loyalist lifers in familiar terms. There had been no acknowledgement in their treatment of the 2-year ceasefire. The Prime Minister said that we knew how important these issues were for the Loyalists. We could not tackle all their demands. Loyalist prisoner discipline, abuse of existing schemes and the Billy Wright case were all unhelpful. But some limited moves were possible.

Sir Patrick Mayhew went through the four proposed concessions: more pre-release leave, home visits for lifers recommended for release, extra Christmas leave, and removal of unescorted medical leave anomalies. These were small in themselves but worthwhile. They would of course apply to all prisoners, not just Loyalists.

Smith said all steps forward were welcome, but the prisoner issue was a major problem for the Loyalists. The prisoners had been very constructive, even in the immediate aftermath of Thiepval. He hoped for more generous treatment of lifers with medical problems. It would also be good if sentences could be reviewed after eight years, not ten. This would only affect a few prisoners but would be a welcome gesture. Sir Patrick Mayhew said that all prisoners with serious medical conditions were considered for early release, but this had to be medically justified in each case. On the early review point, he was wary of creating false expectations - actual releases would not come any sooner.

White said that he was disappointed more Christmas leave had not been offered. He also hoped the possibility of parole could be considered after 10 years, not 11 as now. No-one would criticise such a measure. Again only very few prisoners would be affected. Sir Patrick Mayhew said that such a step would benefit more PIRA prisoners. McMichael and Ervine both said this was not a problem. Indeed it would be helpful in putting further pressure on the Provisionals. It was notable that there was no support for renewed violence from the Provisionals' communities after Thiepval.

The Prime Minister said the proposed relaxations could be announced today. Ervine said he would prefer this to wait. He wanted the immediate public focus to be on the political aspects of the meeting, not prisoners. And he hoped we might still make a better offer, eg on parole. But he would not rubbish publicly what had been offered. Sir John Wheeler said there were real political risks in reducing the parole eligibility. The Northern Ireland regime was already much more generous than the rest of the UK and there could be criticism. And it would be seen by many as a gesture to the republicans. The Prime Minister said that we would nevertheless reflect further on what had been suggested.

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In conclusion, there was a short discussion of the public line, continued after the Prime Minister's departure to meet President Moi of Kenya. The Loyalists were keen not to sound unhelpful, and did indeed speak in reasonable terms in Downing Street afterwards.

Comment

I assume the issue of publicising the prisoner relaxations will be pursued further with the Loyalists, and the earlier parole point considered rapidly. I know the Prime Minister would not object if your Secretary of State felt able to move on the latter, but that is of course for him to decide.

I am copying this letter to Jan Polley (Cabinet Office).

Yours etc
JH

JOHN HOLMES

Ken Lindsay, Esq.,
Northern Ireland Office.

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