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10 DOWNING STREET  
LONDON SW1A 2AA

FAXED

SUBJECT  
MASTER

Filed on:

From the Private Secretary

19 February 1998

*Dear Ken,*

### CONVERSATION WITH THE TAOISEACH, 19 FEBRUARY

The Prime Minister and the Taoiseach spoke on the telephone late this morning, for about 15 minutes.

The Prime Minister began by saying that he was aware of the problems facing the Taoiseach, not least since Sinn Fein seemed to be winning the propaganda battle. He was not sure how this had come about. The Taoiseach said that they certainly were winning the battle. Part of the problem was statistics such as that, of the 19 people killed in Northern Ireland in the last six months, 17 were catholics. These had a huge impact on public opinion. They felt that no-one was caught for these attacks, while the minute the Republicans did something, they were nabbed the next day. There was a huge perception problem about the RUC going back over the years.

The Taoiseach continued that he thought we were fairly close on the terms of the indictment, with only a couple of areas of drafting to sort out. Dr. Mowlam wanted to say that the two murders showed that Sinn Fein had "demonstrably dishonoured" the Mitchell principles. However the American had conveyed the view, via George Mitchell, that they did not want that in. We should perhaps say that the provisions of Rule 29 had been violated, rather than actually writing "demonstrably dishonoured". Dr Mowlam would of course be free to say these words orally if she wanted to. However the real problem was the length of time.

The Prime Minister said that he really did not want to lose Sinn Fein out of the process at all, but this was unavoidable. It was not just a question of losing the Unionists otherwise. Our own position would also be untenable. Those charged with the murder of Dougan had now joined the PIRA wing at the Maze. He was aware of the problem of perception of the security forces in the Nationalist community, although he had confidence in the Chief Constable. In any case, we could not possibly say that we did not accept the word of our own security forces.

CONFIDENTIAL



## CONFIDENTIAL

- 2 -

The Taoiseach said that he was ready to go on with the indictment process, and had been saying so all along. But he had to say that his colleagues did not trust the RUC. His intelligence advisers believed that we had a mole in the IRA who had been involved directly in setting up the operation and had then fingered those concerned. This man was now safely across the water in Britain. He had nothing against our having such moles to catch murderers, but he was not sure that this helped our case. It was a pity there were not some moles in the LVF as well.

The Prime Minister said that he had never heard such a thing. Going back to the time, specifying 2 March would lead to a Unionist walk-out, and quite possibly an end to the bipartisan policy here. He was more worried about the effect on the Unionists of the latter, than its direct impact. He could only think that we should let the UDP into the talks on Monday, and say to Sinn Fein that they could be in by mid-March. We might then be able to get them in sooner than that, particularly if they showed clear evidence of their disavowal of violence, etc., in the meantime. There was however a fear that Sinn Fein would not actually come back on any date that was set, but would demand a fresh negotiation.

The Taoiseach said that he did not want to see the end of bipartisanship in Britain, or the Unionists walking out. But Sinn Fein had used some strong language in their presentation, which ought to be useful. Moreover, the Americans had made clear that Adams' visa depended on Sinn Fein going back into the talks. His own view was that if we gave them a date, they would come back into the talks on that day. He wanted that date to be 2 March.

The Prime Minister said that he did not see how a week on Monday for Sinn Fein's return was do-able in political terms. We should say mid-March, and Sinn Fein could be tipped the wink that they could be in earlier. Otherwise the Unionists would certainly go. The Taoiseach asked whether they could be sounded out. The Prime Minister said that this was too dangerous.

The Taosieach said that he felt that the shorter time Sinn Fein were out for, the less time there was for mischief – by others, he added. The Prime Minister said that if he thought the process could survive a date of 2 March, he would be prepared to live with it, despite the intense media criticism there would be here. But we would simply lose both the UUP and the Conservatives. He continued to think that setting a time of mid-March, and letting them in earlier in

CONFIDENTIAL



CONFIDENTIAL

- 3 -

practice, should be saleable. Sinn Fein would have been treated better than the UDP.

The Taoiseach said that he would face a huge furore if the time scale was long. He also did not want to set a date, and let Sinn Fein in before that date, since this would look as if we were succumbing to pressure. He was very anxious to avoid this. The Prime Minister wondered whether 9 March might run.

The Taoiseach did not pick this up but said he would discuss the position with his colleagues again, and speak to the Prime Minister later. In any case, he was anxious to get on with the process. The Prime Minister said that, whatever we decided about the time, it would be essential for us that there were really strong disavowals of violence by Sinn Fein and a recommitment to the peace process. The Taoiseach agreed, but said that it was not easy for the Irish Government to have much influence on Sinn Fein at present. He added that the Irish Government were under a lot of pressure from public opinion – more than from Parliament.

The Prime Minister said that we ought surely be able to get across the fact that, when the IRA had committed two murders, Sinn Fein could not stay in the process when the UDP had been expelled for something similar. The Taoiseach said he agreed in principle, but the public distinguished in practice between the drug dealer and a Loyalist leader on the one hand and innocent Catholics on the other. He found the same public reaction in Ireland to the deaths of criminals at the hands of other criminals.

The conversation ended with agreement to speak again later, on the basis that this needed to be sorted out today.

I am copying this 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

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