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From the Principal Private Secretary

26 February 1998

Dear Ken,

MEETING WITH THE UDP, 26 FEBRUARY

The Prime Minister met McMichael, White, Adams and McCoubrey for 35 minutes this morning. Dr Mowlam, Alastair Campbell and I were also there.

McMichael said that they were trying to catch up after four weeks away from the Talks. The overall environment was not good. His own constituency was extremely dissatisfied with the way Sinn Fein's expulsion had been handled, with a fixed date given, and a shorter period of expulsion. This was despite the IRA failure to admit their violence, and Sinn Fein's obvious deceit over their relationship with the IRA. This had created serious problems on the ground, made worse by Sinn Fein's ploy of seeking a meeting with the Prime Minister. It was vital that there was no further sign of Sinn Fein being treated differently. If the Prime Minister met Adams before 9 March, this would be another example of double standards. The UDP had said they would need to fundamentally review their attitude to the Talks if it happened. This was not them talking, but the street. He did not want to press gang the Prime Minister, but if he saw Adams while Sinn Fein was under suspension, there would be a huge problem.

The Prime Minister said that, as usual, we were attacked whatever we did. He had made no commitment on a meeting with Adams, and had firmly logged the point made. The most important thing was to make as much progress as possible, as rapidly as possible, before the pressures on both sides collapsed the process. His impression was that the Loyalists wanted to make the process work, but were under great pressure from their extremists. The Sinn Fein leadership was in the same position. That was why we were keen to set a short timetable. He wanted to add that, if there was more violence from any of the parties, they would obviously not be able to come back into the Talks.

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Adams reinforced the point made by McMichael about the strength of feeling about the possibility of a meeting with Gerry Adams during the period of suspension. The Prime Minister repeated that he understood. He wished the UDP knew the problems we had gone through in order to get Sinn Fein out at all. But the only answer was to move rapidly to a settlement. White agreed. The UDP supported the Talks process, whether they were in it or out of it. He believed Adams and McGuinness did want to go back in, and were having real problems with their constituents. But Sinn Fein had no grounds for complaint - quite the reverse. He believed the Talks could succeed, and that the participants were committed to them.

The Prime Minister asked whether a settlement based on the Propositions Document and including North/South structures answerable to the Northern Ireland Assembly was sellable to the UDP's constituency. McMichael said that the UDP was ready to campaign on the ground for elements of a settlement that their people would not like. The package could be sold in the context of a strong legislative assembly, and the Council of the Islands umbrella. Perception was more important than reality here, and people feared a North/South body with a life of its own. That was why the East/West context was so important. The powers of the North/South body were also crucial. It could not be an empty shell, but also should not be seen as controlling large areas of life.

The Prime Minister asked whether the trick could be pulled of different parties selling a settlement in very different ways. McMichael said that both sides would have to sell a package, ie the North/South elements as well as the Assembly. Unionists were not afraid of change, provided that it was under democratic control. What they feared was change outside their control, through a freestanding North/South body which would be seen as an embryo government. Dr Mowlam said that the UDP had an interesting idea of a common platform, endorsed by six or seven parties and the British Government. It would be hard for others to resist such a platform.

Adams said this was vital. If each side was left to sell the settlement to its own people, each side's selling points would upset the other and there would be a point-scoring downward spiral. All those who endorsed the settlement should sing from the same hymn sheet, and take on the extremists on both sides.

The Prime Minister asked whether the UDP could keep the Loyalist ceasefire intact. McMichael said that the evidence was already there. The IRA had deliberately murdered a UDA member to provoke a response. There had not

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been such a response, and this should be recognised. He understood that Sinn Fein and the IRA had a problem, in that there was not much in the likely package to meet the Republican agenda. But there was not much the Loyalists could do about that. Sinn Fein would have to become less intransigent. In any case, we could not compromise with irredentism. Sinn Fein would oppose whatever came out of the Talks.

Adams added that we should remember that the SDLP was the biggest nationalist party. The Republicans would always push for as much as they could get. But the SDLP had no real problems with the Propositions text. The latest discussions in the Talks, including on Strand II, had been excellent. Republicanism could not be satisfied in the Talks process, because Republicans could not in ideological terms accept the result.

McMichael confirmed that the last few days of the Talks had been the most constructive debate in three years. All those concerned could see that the agreement was there. The UDP would be as helpful as they could, and would stand shoulder to shoulder with the nationalists in selling the agreement if they had to. But if the Prime Minister met Adams too soon, all this would be ruined.

The Prime Minister said this sounded encouraging, but a lot depended on what happened on the ground. McMichael agreed. He feared that, whoever was responsible for the latest bombs, there would be more. The Prime Minister asked whether it would not be possible to make clear to the outside world that real progress was being made. He also asked whether the current practice of meeting for only three days a week was sufficient, given the short time left. Adams said that they should make intensive use of the three days next week, and add extra time if necessary. White repeated that everyone knew what the settlement would be. He did not think it would really be difficult to write it down.

McMichael commented that progress could slow down when Sinn Fein came back in, although if good progress was being made, the momentum could be unstoppable. An early referendum and early elections would not suit the UDP in voting terms, but they believed it necessary to do both as quickly as possible. Otherwise those outside, particularly the DUP, would have time to unstitch the deal. The marching season would be difficult whether there was an agreement or not. People would rush to sign up to an agreement, unless they were given too much time to think about it. It would of course be helpful if the Government could release a few prisoners first

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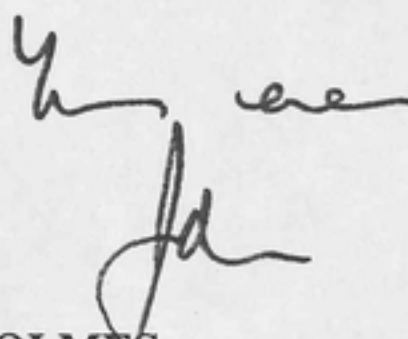
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Adams returned to the Sinn Fein point, to re-emphasise the danger of the Prime Minister seeing Adams too soon. Sinn Fein claimed a settlement was impossible without them. This was not so, but if the Prime Minister gave in, he would be seen to confirm the Sinn Fein thesis. The Prime Minister said that his strategy was to bind Sinn Fein in if at all possible but, if they were out of the process, to ensure that they were out without respectable friends. McMichael said that they entirely agreed with this view. They too wanted to see Sinn Fein in if possible.

Comment

This was a useful and constructive meeting. Apart from making the point about the Adams meeting (which they repeated a lot more times than I have recorded), the UDP were very positive and helpful on the substance. Their idea of a common platform to sell the agreement is worth considering, although it may be unrealistic in practice.

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



JOHN HOLMES

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Northern Ireland Office

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