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CONFIDENTIAL10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA

From the Principal Private Secretary

20 February 1998

*Dear Gen,***SINN FEIN: CONVERSATION WITH DAVID TRIMBLE,
20 FEBRUARY**

The Prime Minister spoke to Trimble this morning, following his conversations with the Taoiseach. He said that he wanted to bring Trimble up to date with where things stood on Sinn Fein. The Irish were losing heart about doing anything at all, because of how they saw nationalist opinion, following Sinn Fein's successful propaganda campaign. The most they were ready to do was to expel them but say that they could be back in by 9 March, depending on what happened in the meantime. Of course, if there was more violence before then, that would be it.

Trimble said that he thought the latest body might also be a Republican murder. He was surprised that the Irish were being so feeble. They had been fine earlier in the week, and the Irish press had not been too bad. In any case, he had no hesitation in saying that bringing Sinn Fein back in on 9 March was ridiculous.

The Prime Minister said that there was in any case a significant chance that Sinn Fein would not come back in. Meanwhile, he feared that the SDLP were also very flaky about this, even Seamus Mallon. Nevertheless, he wanted to make a real push to get an agreement on the substance in the next few weeks, and use the time when Sinn Fein were out to bring other parties together. He understood Trimble was bound to criticise the date, but it was important to keep the Irish bound in if we were going to have any chance of achieving rapid progress. He would like to meet Trimble next week to go through the end game in some detail.

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Trimble wondered whether the SDLP would be prepared to talk seriously, if they thought that Sinn Fein were only out for a couple of weeks. The Prime Minister said he was not sure, but he thought the Irish were very ready to press on. Ahern was very fed up with Sinn Fein, because of the £1 million debacle in Dublin Castle. Ahern had incidentally thought the meeting with the UUP on Sunday night had gone well.

Trimble said he was glad Ahern thought it had been successful. He had not been so sure. Ahern's own position was fine, but the discussions had not gone into much detail, and Liz O'Donnell had been something of a wet blanket. He was very comfortable with the idea of pushing on rapidly with the talks, although he was not clear the SDLP would play ball. Meanwhile, he was worried about the way that Sinn Fein's date for re-entry was referred to. Could we not say it should be reviewed on 9 March? The Prime Minister said that we were aiming for language about envisaging their return on 9 March, with strong provisions about no violence in the meantime. He feared that if we did not act today, even with the unsatisfactory date, the whole issue might drift away altogether. We needed to get the expulsion out. It was possible that the IRA would go back to violence anyway, but he was confident that the Americans would cast Sinn Fein into the darkness if that happened, and Ahern was also robust.

Trimble said that he had also heard the UDP were being brought back in next week. He was very unhappy about this. He had seen nothing from them suggesting their ceasefire was genuine. The Prime Minister said he was not sure exactly where things stood. He was unhappy about the situation we found ourselves in. It was "grimy". But the only way out was to crack on with the substance as far as possible. One idea was to set a date for a referendum.

Trimble said he would rather talk about completing the talks by a certain date. It might be helpful to say that today, for example by referring to the need to complete the talks by Easter, which meant 9 April.

The Prime Minister said that this would mean that Sinn Fein were at least out of the talks for a good portion of the time left. Trimble said that, in his view, Sinn Fein were heading out of the talks. If they were going to wreck them, they would try to wreck them at Easter, which was why it was helpful to say we wanted to complete the talks by then.

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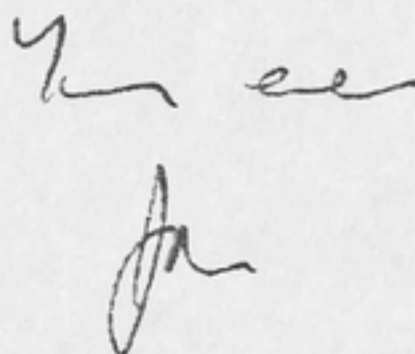
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The Prime Minister repeated that he looked forward to meeting Trimble next week for a proper session. One advantage of the present situation was that at least the Irish might be amenable on the substance. Trimble said that he would be available at any time next week.

Comment

This conversation went as well as it could have done in the circumstances. There was no hint from Trimble of a walk out, although his public reaction is bound to be fierce. He rang me back later to say that he would denounce the decision and make clear that the UUP would have to review their position. I am warning the Irish that we have had to traduce their position in order to keep Trimble on board. They understood (and will welcome criticism from Trimble for their own reasons).

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).

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'John Holmes', with a stylized flourish at the end.

JOHN HOLMES

Ken Lindsay Esq
Northern Ireland Office

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