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From: John Holmes
Date: 25 March 1998

PRIME MINISTER

MEETING WITH TRIMBLE, 1230

This should be a private meeting. I assume you don't want the NIO there (Mo has offered Murphy)? I am not sure if Trimble is bringing anyone, but assume he is.

The main question is whether Trimble is serious about a deal in general, and a deal by Easter in particular. Mitchell apparently thinks he is, following a long talk with him. The Irish and Americans are doubtful. Views in the NIO are divided. I genuinely don't know.

On the plus side, he has stayed in the talks despite attacks from Paisley and McCartney, and internally, and has been ready to engage in serious discussion of issues with us, the Irish and (in principle) with the SDLP, though the UUP's performance in the talks themselves has remained poor. He must be very conscious of the risk of being left holding black spot if the talks collapse. He must be attracted by the idea of real power.

On the negative side, he has not prepared his supporters for a deal on anything like the terms likely to be available. He is doing everything possible to get Sinn Fein out of the process, at a time when they seem keener than ever to buy in. He has now resurrected decommissioning, which could easily be a showstopper. His positions on Strand 2 and Strand 1 remain a long way from negotiability. His room for manoeuvre following his Executive is narrow (and he has hardly tried to widen it). He is casting doubt wherever possible on the Easter deadline.

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I think you need to tackle Trimble pretty directly about all this. To reach agreement he is going to have to move a long way (as will others, of course). Is he ready to do so, in short order? Are his supporters prepared?

You also need to cover the following ground:

Decommissioning

Trimble is saying that, since there has been no parallel decommissioning, those linked with paramilitary groups should not be able to take office in the Assembly until verified disarmament has occurred. This is not unreasonable in some ways. But it is still unrealistic as a demand and a showstopper, if he really means it. There could be ways round e.g. decommissioning must have to have started, with a fixed timescale agreed, or the Assembly itself could have the power to disqualify office-holders in the case of no move to decommissioning or a return to violence.

Sinn Fein

The RUC Chief Constable has cut the ground from under the UUP by telling them privately yesterday, and confirming publicly today, that the IRA have not been responsible for recent attacks, though some IRA dissidents may be involved. There is increasing evidence of Adams and McGuinness going in a political direction, with most of the movement still with them, and the 32 Counties Committee, Continuity IRA and INLA going in the other direction.

North/South

The Irish redraft of our paper is a long way from what would be acceptable to Trimble, not surprisingly since our own paper was itself not acceptable to him.

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The Irish have added in a lot of padding, including wide-ranging North/South Council responsibility, more meetings of the North-South Council, insistence that it be established in Westminster legislation, a free-standing secretariat able to put forward proposals, implementation bodies answerable to the Council, with some established immediately through Westminster legislation, its own funding, wide-ranging EU responsibilities, a Consultative Forum, and a "mechanism for resolving disagreement". Overall the presentation builds up the Council as an important decision-making body, meeting frequently and with its own finance, and goes back in a Frameworks direction.

Trimble has not seen this text (and did not in fact see the final version we sent the Irish either). The NIO think we should show it to him. This would have the advantage of transparency and showing him what we are up against. But I worry about his reaction. I think it may be better to send the Irish comments or a revised version, once you have seen Trimble. But you should tell him that we are in discussion with the Irish and it is clear that we will do extremely well to come out even with something resembling our version.

Strand 1

Trimble has sent us 10 pages of comments on the Strand 1 paper we sent him. He rejects any idea of cross-community voting safeguards, and the idea of collective government, and raises a whole host of other issues. The NIO claim to see some silver linings, e.g. his acceptance of the need for a Finance Committee and "liaison" arrangements, and are sending us comments tomorrow morning. But at a minimum he has a long way to go to get into the right ballpark. He met Hume on Monday, which went quite well, but a more detailed meeting has not yet followed.

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Constitution

We may be able to show Trimble some texts which contain good language on the consent principle. The NIO will send these in the morning.

The following texts are attached. I think you need at least to glance at them:

- North/South paper we sent the Irish last week
- Irish North/South paper in response
- Our Strand 1 text
- Trimble's comments

As you know we have agreed to discuss with the Irish later this week our texts, apart from Strand 1 and North South, to try to reach agreement where we can. We have also given a copy of our full text to Mitchell, as have the Irish, on a confidential basis. Mitchell is suddenly active, putting the squeeze on everyone. He is talking of having a single text on the table by Wednesday next week, and negotiating continuously from Monday 6 April until agreement is reached. Frankly, I think we needed this injection of momentum from an outside source, though it may not be altogether comfortable for us. It will be interesting to see what Trimble thinks of this.



JOHN HOLMES