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SUBJECT
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From the Principal Private Secretary

31 March 1998

Dear Gen,

MEETING WITH JOHN HUME, 31 MARCH

The Prime Minister spent an hour with John Hume this afternoon. Hume was alone. Jonathan Powell and I were there.

The Prime Minister said that he had had a read-out of the SDLP meeting with Dr Mowlam and Paul Murphy that morning. He wanted to work out the difficulties, and see what further he needed to say to David Trimble. Hume said that the SDLP had worked out their position carefully on the Strand 1 issues. Trimble should do the same. (He handed over the attached two papers, one an outline of the SDLP position on Strand 1, and a second containing comments on the paper we sent him yesterday.) Trimble would be getting a change to Articles 2 and 3, which was a big thing for the Irish; he would also be getting acceptance of the principle of consent, an Assembly, and a Council of the Isles. The Unionists were giving nothing comparable in return. His own approach remained what it had always been, that the need was to find a framework where the two sides could begin to work together and heal the wounds of the past. Unfortunately, while the Nationalist mentality based on the territorial claim and violence had changed, the Unionist laager mentality had not, at least among politicians.

Hume continued that in Strand 2, the SDLP wanted North-South bodies strictly on the European model. Matters of common concern should be dealt with by the North-South Council, where Ministers would meet and act only if they agreed. There should be a permanent secretariat. There could also be a Parliamentary tier, if the Unionists agreed. The Unionists had problems with the words "executive powers", but the world had changed. The Unionists had to adjust to reality. There had been deep debate inside Sinn Fein, where the political element had been successful. Splinter groups were trying to damage

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this, but some of them at least were more driven by gangsterism than ideology. Meanwhile he was concerned about the recent story in the Sunday Telegraph about Brian Nelson, and a book called "The Committee" just published in the US. Both suggested that insiders had advised loyalists in the past about which Catholics they should kill. He wondered why these things were coming out now. In any case, the SDLP line was not based on taking the hardest position possible, and hoping someone would split the difference, but trying to follow the European model in encouraging the two sides to work together. Power-sharing, and North-South institutions working by agreement, could create a new society in a generation or two. That was why power-sharing was so important. It was also vital that a settlement be put to the people in referendums, North and South, because this would be the first time the people of Ireland had spoken since 1918. This would undermine the Sinn Fein claim to legitimacy. Gerry Adams was doing a Devalera.

The Prime Minister tried to bring the conversation back to practicalities. On Strand 1, the Unionists opposed an executive committee. Hume said that the UUP favoured a local government model, but this was hardly appropriate. Collective responsibility was vital, as was a strong executive. He was convinced that, once it was established, it would work perfectly well. Most of the issues would be economic.

The Prime Minister said that there could be a general committee with oversight of what was happening across the board, for example a kind of finance and general purposes committee. That is what he had been telling the UUP was necessary. It would be a move towards the SDLP's executive committee model. But there was a problem of sanctions if collective responsibility was to work. Hume said that this could be solved through the duty of service. He quoted the SDLP paper on this. The Prime Minister wondered whether the UUP might be brought to accept some kind of collective responsibility, and even the title of First Minister, although the names were not really important.

The Prime Minister turned to the cross-community voting system. The SDLP preferred sufficient consensus to a percentage, but how was this to be defined? Why could it not be expressed as a percentage? Hume said that it could, for example 65 per cent, but this could easily give a veto to Paisley.

This led on to a lengthy discussion on the right percentage for a weighted majority voting system and for trigger mechanisms. We argued that 30 per cent was more realistic than 20 per cent for the latter, if a trigger mechanism was to

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be used. The Prime Minister suggested that it should be possible to find a formula to get through this issue, for example that, where cross-community support was required, at least one substantial party from both communities had to accept the proposal. Hume said that they had crawled through all this endlessly and concluded that sufficient consensus, as set out in their paper, was the only viable system. He added that the SDLP had practised what they preached in the local council in Derry, and this was proving successful.

The Prime Minister went back to the North-South issues. He saw the important thing as ensuring that implementation bodies could do the job they were given meaningfully. Hume agreed and cited the example of the Foyle Fisheries Commission, which worked away without difficulty. But he added that the secretariat should also be able to implement things themselves in some areas. The Prime Minister said that, provided it was clear that the North-South Council was operating under the authority of the Dail and the Assembly, he thought the Unionists would accept that there would be implementation bodies and that they would be allowed to function.

Hume added that the North-South Council had to have a clear institutional identity, separate from and independent of East-West arrangements, and meaningful decision-making functions. He then revealed he was quoting from an SDLP document on their bottom lines. He gave us the attached copy, while making clear that he was not supposed to do so (our possession of it should therefore be carefully protected). I made clear that, presentationally, it was important for the Unionists that the North-South arrangements should seem to be in an overall East-West context.

Decommissioning

The Prime Minister said that Trimble's approach to this was not as unreasonable as some had feared, and he had told Adams earlier in the day that he had to think about it seriously. We had removed the decommissioning obstacle from the talks, quite deliberately, but once there was an agreement, the position of parties like Sinn Fein would have to be different. Hume agreed. There would have to be decommissioning to the satisfaction of an independent commission, as had been recommended by Mitchell.

The Prime Minister asked whether Adams would accept this. Hume thought so, but said that the way to put this was to talk about Sinn Fein voluntarily destroying their arms to the satisfaction of an independent

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commission. There was no history in Ireland of handing over weapons to anybody else.

I wondered whether the decommissioning issue could be dealt with by covering it in the "oath of allegiance" for postholders in a Northern Ireland Administration. The Prime Minister made clear that we needed a formula which would get us through the agreement. Hume said that he would talk to Adams, and ask him whether he could come up with a formula.

Hume concluded that it might be helpful if some of the SDLP's young, bright people (e.g. Durhan) came to London to talk to us privately. The Prime Minister welcomed this.

Comment

Hume was as vague as ever, but the papers he brought give us a pretty good idea of where the SDLP are. There are obvious difficulties about the North-South Council, about sufficient consensus and collective responsibility in Strand 1, and international commissions for policing and criminal justice. But the problems they throw up do not look insoluble. We need to reflect further on the issues of cross-community voting and collective responsibility. We may need to work on the UUP to move them a bit further in the SDLP direction.

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

Yours ever
JH

JOHN HOLMES

Ken Lindsay Esq
Northern Ireland Office

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