

SUBJECT  
MASTER

Filed on:

Ireland Pt 22

The  
CONFIDENTIAL10 DOWNING STREET  
LONDON SW1A 2AA

f/alderdice 31 March 1998

FAXED

Via Brent to NS  
3/3 NS -b JP AC PB  
PMF MPakenham

From the Principal Private Secretary

31 March 1998

Dear Sir,

## CONVERSATION WITH GERRY ADAMS, 31 MARCH

Adams began by saying that he would like a meeting with the Prime Minister, to go through the issues before we got near an agreement. The Prime Minister said that he would look at this. He remembered what he had said to Adams on the telephone some time ago. But he hoped Adams understood that he had to spend time with Trimble in order to bring him into the right position. There were many difficulties in the process, including decommissioning, prisoners and policing. But the question of North/South bodies and how they would function was perhaps the key.

Adams said that the constitutional issue was also vital, including the Act of Union, the Government of Ireland Act, and subsequent acts. He would be talking to Dr. Mowlam about this later in the day. In general, he believed that the Unionists would only have an incentive to join the peace process when they knew serious change was coming anyway. We should not become fixated with cobbling something together. Rather, we needed something that would work. There were also other issues which could not be dodged, such as the renewed allegations about Brian Nelson, and the UN report on the RUC. On the latter, he was ready to go with a Commission, as long as it was designed to produce a proper police service and the terms of reference made this clear. But he supposed the Unionists would resist all this.

The Prime Minister said that they would resist, but they were also ready to move. The difficulty was the mistrust on both sides, particularly when it came to writing things down. Adams said that, from his point of view, the issue was not one of mistrust. More simply, Northern Ireland was a dreadful place to live because of the lack of democracy and abuses. These things had to be changed whether or not there were successful talks. Mistrust was a symptom, not a

CONFIDENTIAL

As



## CONFIDENTIAL

- 2 -

cause. The Unionists had abused their power for a long time. They now had to change. The Prime Minister had referred to some sort of cross-border bodies. These things were set out in the Framework Document, but the British Government seemed to be renegotiating the Framework Document. The fact that the two Governments did not agree eroded confidence. It was hard to understand how a modernising Government could not even accept what John Major had negotiated.

The Prime Minister said that it was theoretically open to him to impose change on the Unionists, but if both communities did not accept any arrangement, it would not work. In that sense, everyone had a veto. He was not undermining the Framework Document, but trying to make sense of the North/South proposals in a way the Unionists could accept. We wanted to reach an agreement if we could, and the Unionists had in fact moved a long way in accepting Propositions.

Adams said that the Unionists had always been ready to accept some kind of North/South structures but played their minimalist negotiating game quite cleverly, so that any movement from their side seemed significant. Sinn Fein had genuinely moved a huge distance from the ideological position of republicanism, in their readiness to accept a transition. They wanted an accommodation, but it had to be one which could develop on a reasonable timescale. Trimble had much more manoeuvre in practice than he suggested.

The Prime Minister raised decommissioning. This was a genuine problem. We had managed to prevent it becoming an obstacle in the talks, but it would have to be dealt with on a reasonable timescale. Adams said that he regarded it as a sleeping dog which he did not wish to kick. He had thought about Dr. Mowlam's idea to move things forward (presumably the proposal for an IRA contact point) over the weekend, but it would not work. There was no point in looking for an initiative from the IRA about this outside a settlement. The Prime Minister said that he could see this, but Sinn Fein needed to think about how to deal with this question. We had moved a long way on this ourselves. It was time for Sinn Fein to take it seriously. Adams said this was fair comment. He had noted what the two Governments had said the previous day about finding an effective way of dealing with this. He had no specific ideas, but would reflect.

Adams continued that his own big message was that any agreement had to be deep rooted, create a genuinely level playing field, and attract the allegiance

CONFIDENTIAL



CONFIDENTIAL

- 3 -

of both sides. If the Nationalists seemed to demand a lot at times, this was because the present situation was so unequal. Meanwhile, he continued to want a focussed discussion with the Prime Minister about the constitutional issue and what changes we were considering. The Prime Minister said that he would come back to Adams about a meeting, and would in any case call Adams again before too long.

Adams said that Sinn Fein had to be kept in the loop. The UUP strategy remained to do a deal without Sinn Fein, although they had been told by the Irish and the SDLP that this would not work. Sinn Fein would not acquiesce in such a scenario. They had the ball at their feet over an unarmed political campaign, with good electoral prospects. They wanted to be in a settlement. The third largest party in the talks could not simply be written out of the script. Some Unionists thought that it would be best to have the republicans back in violence, so that they could be treated just as terrorists. That was crazy. There was now a unique opportunity available. Sinn Fein intended to be part of an agreement whatever others wanted.

Comment:

The strength of Adams' message at the end, that they have no intention of being left out of a settlement, could not have been clearer. We need to reflect further on what contact the Prime Minister should have with him in the coming week. Presumably the best time to look at this again would be after the meeting with Ahern, although the Prime Minister will be effectively out of action for most Northern Ireland purposes from Thursday morning until Saturday lunchtime, because of the Asia/Europe Summit.

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

  
JOHN HOLMES

Ken Lindsay, Esq.,  
Northern Ireland Office.

CONFIDENTIAL