

File
JH
30/3.

From: John Holmes
Date: 27 March 1998

PRIME MINISTER

NORTHERN IRELAND

The telephone call with the Taoiseach should be around 1030 tomorrow morning. Your objective must be to scale down his ambitions. His will be the same in reverse, not least because of his worries about selling change to Articles 2 and 3. You will need to be quite tough. You will want to cover the following:

- Overall settlement: prospects, respective texts, Mitchell's involvement.
- North-South: unacceptability of Irish draft text (see attached letter from me to Teahon) .
- Trimble's position/mood.
- Decommissioning: need to do something to meet Trimble's concern (Irish will be very resistant because Sinn Fein are still telling them there is no chance of decommissioning).
- Process: Teahon reacted positively to the idea of a dinner on Wednesday night (but this is late for the purposes of Mitchell's ambition to have a full text on the table by then).

NIO and Irish officials had a long negotiating session today, comparing respective texts. They made good progress on Chapter 1 (Constitution) and

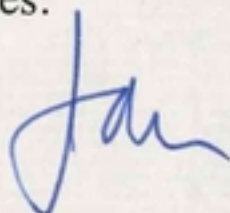
- 2 -

Chapter 3 (Council of the Isles), and discussed Chapter 5 (new British-Irish Agreement) in some detail, with us managing to reduce Irish ambitions a bit. They did not get on to Chapters 6 and 7 (rights and security) in detail, but made clear that the Irish texts were hopeless. Officials are meeting again on Sunday, with the aim of agreeing as much text as possible (as Mitchell has requested). They are not of course tackling North-South or Strand 1.

As I mentioned on the phone, the Irish had a very long meeting with Sinn Fein earlier this week, from which it became clear that Sinn Fein want to be part of a settlement, even if this hastens the departure of some dissidents. This is good news in a way, but will make agreeing a settlement harder: Trimble does not want them in at any price, and their involvement will make the Irish/SDLP position much tougher.

Meanwhile the situation on the ground has taken a turn for the worse, with an ex-policeman shot dead earlier this evening (not clear by whom) and the Orange Order taking an uncompromising position on this year's parades (there is one major contentious parade at Easter). The Parades Commission are incidentally not now going to make any proposals before Easter.

I am afraid I have not yet been able to produced revised versions of the North-South and Strand 1 texts to show Trimble on Sunday but will have a go tomorrow. I think we need something slightly different from the existing texts in both cases.



JOHN HOLMES

q:\docs\foreign\ni ecl.doc

NB Mo was given a very unpleasant time by the UUP this week one decommunitarian, being constantly called a liar. She is a bit bruised, and of course constantly upset by our own friendly chats with Trimble. I suggest you call her when you have spoken to them.