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From: JOHN HOLMES
Date: 18 December 1996

PRIME MINISTER

CALL BY UUP: 1630

1. Trimble rang me over the weekend to request a meeting for him and Taylor with you before Christmas. He said that he wanted to take stock of the talks and prospects for progress in the New Year. He recalled his previous conversation with you when he had expressed concern about what would happen if there was no visible progress by Christmas. But he would not be drawn further.
2. As I had mentioned to you, late last week the prospects for progress on decommissioning before Christmas looked quite good. The UUP, SDLP and Alliance were working well together and had put a joint paper to George Mitchell. This could have formed the basis of a way around the present blockage, based on parallel provision of an independent Commission and Sub-Committee. Ken Maginnis was in the lead on the UUP side.
3. When Trimble came back into the act at the beginning of this week he stopped this progress in its tracks and disowned what Ken Maginnis had done. It therefore became clear that there would be no progress before Christmas, and the talks were duly adjourned today until 27 January, with bilateral talks restarting on 13 January.
4. This is not a bad outcome in the circumstances. The talks are still in being, and no one is threatening to leave. But the UUP's attitude is worrying. Their credibility with others in the talks is at an all-time low. Trimble is rarely at the

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

- 2 -

talks himself but very unhelpful when he is. On this occasion, perhaps under pressure from Taylor, he seems to have decided that he needs to keep a block on decommissioning in order to give the UUP an extra guarantee that Sinn Fein will not be allowed into the talks. Sinn Fein in is of course the UUP nightmare.

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7. Your main objective therefore should be to encourage the UUP to stay in the talks, and to press them to allow progress on decommissioning when the talks resume in the New Year. You can reassure Trimble that there is no question of Sinn Fein being allowed in unless they genuinely meet the criteria you have set out. But you will also want to warn him again against a situation where he and his party are seen as responsible for the stalemate in the talks, or their breakdown. This remains dangerous for him, as well as for HMG.
- ...8. NIO briefing is attached. This is, for once, on the right lines. But I would not use the points in paragraphs 1 and 2 of their lines to take.

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

- 3 -

It would be much better if this was a private, not a public meeting. It will otherwise lead to all kinds of speculation. It is not in your official diary at the moment. Trimble and Taylor are as leaky as a sieve, as you know. It would be nice if we could persuade them on this occasion to make it a private meeting - but a subsequent leak might be worse than anything (backdoor deals etc).

Perhaps we could have a quick word about this in the morning.



JOHN HOLMES

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