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cc: FAJARS
Pres
BLP

John Holmes Esq
Private Secretary to the
Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
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Dear John

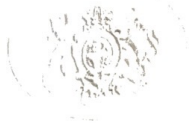
PRIME MINISTER'S MEETING WITH MR TRIMBLE, 19 DECEMBER

The Prime Minister is seeing Mr Trimble on Thursday, at the latter's request. Sir Patrick Mayhew and Michael Ancram will be present. This letter offers briefing, although due to other commitments today, of which you are aware, Sir Patrick has not had an opportunity to clear it.

Unionists in the Talks

The UUP have proved especially difficult to deal with in the discussions on decommissioning in recent weeks. Mr Trimble has mostly been absent. They have fielded frequently-changing teams of negotiators, who appeared to have little authority to act on their own behalf. Their discussions with the SDLP (and Alliance), under the good offices of the Chairmen, however, led to progress over a period of weeks on the mechanics of decommissioning. As a result, agreement on the question appeared achievable at the end of last week.

Even though disagreements remained over the handling of other "confidence building measures" identified in the Mitchell Report - the SDLP favouring their inclusion in the



terms of reference of the proposed talks Liaison Sub-Committee on decommissioning, the UUP opposing anything suggesting linkage between decommissioning and such measures - we considered that these were probably resolvable. Crucially, Mr Trimble had, in private and public statements in the US, spoken in a way that suggested the earlier insistence on decommissioning before Sinn Fein entering substantive negotiations - undeliverable, since the Irish and SDLP would not agree and Sinn Fein could anyway not achieve it - was no longer an imperative.

Hopes had, therefore, developed that a way would be found to conclude the opening plenary this week, with the prospect of substantive negotiations being entered in the New Year, before the election. These proved false, however. The UUP made clear on Monday that they were not interested in reaching agreement on this issue before Christmas, and resurrected their original call for some IRA decommissioning before Sinn Fein could enter negotiations. The argument was made in support of this line that matters had moved on since the Mitchell Report: Mitchell had assumed that the IRA was wholly committed to peace; the ending of the ceasefire indicated that they were not; and mere words would no longer do to convince of their bona fides.

This argument, whatever its merits in principle, does not explain why the UUP have blown hot and cold on the question. Several factors no doubt lead to this state of affairs. One is pressures from within: Mr Trimble has rivals, notably John Taylor; Ken Maginnis, who has done much of the negotiating on decommissioning, has at times made idiosyncratic proposals that Mr Trimble later felt he had to disown; and the UUP in the country may well be fairly

hardline on decommissioning. That hard line has been energetically fed by Mr McCartney and the DUP, and the UUP feels pressure from those quarters ever more acutely as the election approaches.

UUP reservations about progress on the decommissioning issue are also reinforced by the remaining prospects of Sinn Fein entry. Mr Trimble has said that he fears the NIO agenda is determined by a desire to bring Sinn Fein in, at more or less any cost, immediately after Christmas - a line Mr McCartney has, again, been feeding to the press.

It is easy to believe that Mr Trimble sees no prospects for agreement on decommissioning before an election; and he has it in his power to block it, of course. When the Secretary of State met Mr Taylor (in Mr Trimble's absence) on Tuesday, he (Taylor) came close to saying that he could not foresee progress until the general election, and the Northern Ireland local elections due in late May, were concluded. If the gap were to be closed before that, the movement would largely have to come from the SDLP.

Mr Taylor agreed with the Secretary of State's analysis that to close down the talks process now, or in January, would be dangerous; it would leave a vacuum, and it would be likely to imperil the Loyalist ceasefire (the UUP, like us, had received clear messages to that effect).

The Talks resume in bilateral mode on 13 January; the first plenary will be held on 27 January. The Chairmen have provided the basis for putting a positive spin on the position by agreeing to reflect and consult before 27 January with a view to tabling compromise proposals to break the impasse. The UUP may be readier to do a deal if, after

the break, it is clear that Sinn Fein are not present or likely to be present; and they may see a case for at least enabling the formal launch of the substantive political negotiations, to help differentiate themselves from the DUP and UKUP at the election. But if there is no deal soon after resumption it will be difficult to avoid a dangerous political vacuum in the period before the election.

Objectives

We do not know specifically what objectives Mr Trimble has in mind for the meeting.

Our objectives are to sound Mr Trimble about the prospects for further advance; to press on him the advantages of making an agreement on decommissioning early in the New Year, thus enabling the formal launch of substantive negotiations; or at least to be certain what his immediate outlook for the talks is; and to reassure him that Sinn Fein would only be admitted to the talks in accordance with the statement of 28 November (which he endorsed).

I attach a summary of lines to take.

I am sending copies of this letter and enclosure to William Ehrman (FCO) and to Jan Polley and Colin Budd at the Cabinet Office.

Yours ever
David G. Lindsay
for W K LINDSAY

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PRIME MINISTER'S MEETING WITH MR TRIMBLE: LINES TO TAKE

1. Welcome the progress in the talks represented by the significant measure of agreement in the UUP/SDLP/Alliance paper submitted to the Chairmen last week.
2. Assume the Irish Government will support the SDLP position: if so that represents a significant move from their previous commitment to the "1 October" proposals [in which all the weight was put on the Committee];
3. Irish Decommissioning Bill a welcome demonstration of their good faith.
4. We believe there is a strong case for seeking to make further progress in the talks before the election: to resolve the issue of decommissioning when the talks resume, and at least launch the substantive political negotiations;
 - would boost the general credibility of the talks process;
 - the continuation of the process would avoid a political vacuum of a period of months - which we are all aware could be dangerous, not least from the point of view of Loyalists;
 - it is better done early than late: as time goes on, the pre-election atmosphere is likely to make it more difficult;
 - it should also be easier to resolve the issue before there is any question of Sinn Fein coming into the talks;

- although the formal launch of the three strands would be unlikely to lead to substantial political progress, it would provide a firmer foundation for subsequent progress - and a better electoral platform for the UUP and SDLP;
 - any failure to move forward may be seen as the responsibility of the UUP. It would reduce the prospects for detaching the Irish Government and SDLP from their focus on Sinn Fein.
 - We shall stick firmly by the criteria for Sinn Fein admission in my 28 November statement. My statement on terms of entry for Sinn Fein, and my demonstrated refusal to develop my position in response to Irish pressure, means that that flank is secure.
 - We do not, however, believe there is any possibility of securing agreement to any requirement for a tranche of IRA decommissioning before Sinn Fein enter the three strands.
 - Acknowledge and respect your need to see some decommissioning at an early stage thereafter. We are with you on the need for decommissioning during negotiations, in line with the Mitchell recommendations. We will work with you to achieve that. But prior commitments will be unobtainable.
5. But: if there is no prospect of real progress, we cannot keep the talks process going very long.
- we should try to bring them in for a "soft landing", so that the process can be revived after the election.
 - Once we suspend the negotiations, the Secretary of State has by law to suspend the Forum.

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6. Glad to hear your views on whether there is any prospect of reaching agreement on decommissioning early in the New Year.

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