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SUBJECT
MASTER
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From the Private Secretary

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Dear Gen,

CALL BY UKUP: 5 DECEMBER

Robert McCartney, Conor Cruise O'Brien and Cedric Wilson called on the Prime Minister this afternoon in the House of Commons. Only I was there on our side.

McCartney said that the UKUP and the DUP, and to a lesser extent, the UUP were concerned about the Government's statement of 28 November. It suggested that the IRA/Sinn Fein could enter the talks without any decommissioning. The UKUP could not stay in the talks in those circumstances. If the UKUP left, he thought the DUP would go too, and the UUP would find it very difficult to stay. The grass roots of the UUP did not support Trimble's policies. This would bring the talks to a halt; since there could not be all parties talks without all the parties.

The Prime Minister said that he was being denounced by all sides. Sinn Fein said that he had put up an uncrossable barrier to peace. His intention in making the statement had been to make clear that a fake ceasefire was of no interest to him, following the experience of the previous ceasefire. This time we needed more than words. We needed a greater degree of assurance that it was for good, even if the word permanent was not used. We would also know what was happening on the ground and whether the kind of activities spelled out in his statement were continuing, as well as things like punishment beatings.

McCartney said that punishment beatings were not mentioned in the statement. The Prime Minister acknowledged this. There was a problem with the loyalists. McCartney agreed. The loyalists were still up to their neck in punishment beatings.

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The Prime Minister acknowledged there were problems, but he did not want to provide the IRA, who were the real problem, with the justification for further violence by the breaking of the loyalist ceasefire. He wanted to keep the focus on those who were actually planting the bombs, ie the IRA and their splinter groups (the distinction was far from clear).

McCartney said that there was a perception that the IRA's continuing atrocities since they had broken the ceasefire were earning them concessions. The Byzantine language in the statement looked as if it came from Sinn Fein via John Hume, in the usual way. Hume was also saying that the only difference between his text and the Government's statement was that the Government had proposed a series of meetings between a ceasefire and Sinn Fein's invitation to join the talks. It would help to put such fears to rest if the Hume text could be published. In any event, our statement did not call for a complete and permanent ceasefire and stuck to the flawed proposal of Mitchell for parallel decommissioning. Mitchell had imagined he was splitting the difference between the unionists and the IRA. This was a false perception. The unionists were dedicated to democracy and that could not be compromised. Decommissioning would therefore have to have started at least before Sinn Fein could join the talks. There should be no trade off in the talks between political progress and decommissioning.

The Prime Minister said he believed parallel decommissioning was a reasonable position. There was an obvious republican fear that they would get to the end of the talks process, and would have got rid of their arms, and then the unionists would veto the process, or ensure a no vote in a referendum. If McCartney's analysis was followed, the two sides would still be in their trenches 25 years from now. What positive proposals did McCartney have?

McCartney said that he could not give a clear answer to this. But he knew the present talks would fail. Mainland politicians did not understand the nature of the republican beast. They would never give up until the British Government and the unionists had left Ireland.

The Prime Minister commented that some in the IRA might have this as their aim. There was clearly a split in the IRA and Sinn Fein, behind the facade of unity. But the Government had made clear that they would not achieve their aims by violence, however hard they tried.

O'Brien said that he could only begin to believe any republican readiness for a negotiated settlement when they began to get rid of their weapons. The Prime Minister said that parallel decommissioning was a way of making it happen. Meanwhile, the unionists had nothing to fear. He would not, could not and should not sell out Northern Ireland. There was a triple lock on the Union.

McCartney said that the real problem was that, for the republicans, everything was only a staging post to a united Ireland. If the unionists could be convinced that a negotiated settlement would be the end of the matter, they could make many concessions. Trimble talked of the possibility of reaching a settlement without Sinn Fein. But if the men of violence were still out there, there could be no guarantees that more concessions would not have to be made to them to bring them in. So the unionists had no confidence in where the process would ever end. Unionist confidence had been unhinged by the Anglo-Irish Agreement, the Downing Street Declaration and the Framework Document. They were full of language from Sinn Fein via John Hume. O'Brien said that he had made a study of this kind of language, and he had no doubt about it.

The Prime Minister said that the UKUP's description of the process was unrecognisable. It was absurd to suggest that we had simply adopted Sinn Fein's language. The texts had been much fought over, and we had won at least as many battles as we lost.

Wilson said that the Castle Buildings negotiations had been and were being undermined by the fact that separate negotiations with Sinn Fein were going on outside. The Prime Minister said that there had been no negotiations of this kind. He had made clear from the start that he was only prepared to set out his policy. He was not interested in negotiating with Sinn Fein after he had been deceived last time.

McCartney said that he realised he was seen as either a gun carrier for the DUP or as somewhere well to the right of Genghis Khan. These descriptions were not true. He was not an orangeman or sectarian in any way. He was rather committed to pluralist democracy and convinced of the case for the Union. He would not negotiate with gunmen who still had weaponry whether they were orange or green. If Sinn Fein came into the talks, therefore, he would not stay. He thought his departure would force the other Unionist parties to follow suit, even if he only represented 3.6% of the vote. They would otherwise be crucified in the general election.

The Prime Minister asked whether McCartney thought he was trying to sell out Northern Ireland. McCartney denied this. He saw the Prime Minister as a skilled, pragmatic politician pursuing the art of the possible. But the British genius for compromise did not work in Ireland, where principles remained important. Wilson said that the talks process had in fact helped to destabilise Northern Ireland. Relations between the communities, normally calm at this time of year, were worse than ever. The unionist community felt lost, and saw Drumcree as an illustration of the present reality.

O'Brien said that he could bring the Prime Minister one piece of good news. A major political scandal was building up in the Republic - Haughey had taken up to £1 million from a commercial company when he was Taoiseach. That would destabilise Fianna Fail which would be good for Anglo-Irish relations. McCartney agreed, and went on to speculate about the damage being done to the SDLP by John Hume's dalliance with Sinn Fein. This was tragic. He believed that sensible agreement could be reached by the Unionists with Seamus Mallon and his colleagues on a basis which would preserve the Union, but give nationalists a proper stake and include a decent relationship with the Republic. But none of this was possible while Hume was still there, since his only interest was to join the pantheon of republican heroes.

Comment

The meeting lasted for 45 minutes and was a little friendlier in tone than the above account might suggest. But the Prime Minister made clear that he was not prepared to tolerate accusations that he was prepared to sell out the Union. McCartney's analysis was clever, as usual, but ultimately negative, also as usual.

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

Yours ever
John

JOHN HOLMES

Ken Lindsay, Esq.,
Northern Ireland Office.