

BRITISH EMBASSY WASHINGTON

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From: Peter westmacott

Date: 2 December 1996

cc: Minister o/r
Mr McDonald
Mr Alexander
Mr Innes, BIS New York
Mr Stephens, NIO(L)
Mr Lamont, RID, FCO
Mr Priestley, NAD, FCO

PS

ULSTER UNIONIST PARTY

1. I accompanied David Trimble, Sir James Molyneaux, and Geoffrey Donaldson to State Department this morning. They had an hour with Messrs Wayne, Bell and Kashkett, followed by lunch given by Peter Tarnoff,

Talks

2. Trimble said that the talks process was stuck because the SDLP (Hume, in particular) were wholly absorbed with bringing Sinn Fein in rather than with moving forward on substance. The UUP were not against Sinn Fein joining the talks, if they met the criteria. But it was the talks that mattered. The SDLP and UUP needed to work together to demonstrate that the democratic process could achieve results. Otherwise, there was a real danger that the SDLP would lose out to Sinn Fein. Hume should realise that his obsession with Sinn Fein only enhanced the standing of Sinn Fein, at his own party's expense. Rather than having everyone run after them, Sinn Fein needed to be shown that committing violence carried penalties.

3. Trimble recognised that the talks might have to be adjourned in the New Year. If so, he hoped that enough progress would have been made to adjourn with the prospect of further progress. Adjournment sine die would be a mistake, since it would show (a) that the two Governments attached more importance to accommodating Sinn Fein than to the talks themselves, and (b) that they had thrown in the sponge. This would have serious implications for the Loyalist ceasefire (see below).

Hume/Adams

4. Wayne asked Trimble why he thought Hume was so determined to get Sinn Fein into the talks. Trimble spoke of Hume's personal investment in Hume/Adams, but added that since the British Government had declined to show him Hume's "proposals"

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it was hard for him to know whether they had a chance of succeeding. His informal contacts within HMG indicated they had been "unacceptable", so he assumed Hume's initiative was going nowhere. He hadn't much cared for the drafting of the Prime Minister's paper of 28 November, but its intentions on the entry conditions for Sinn Fein were sound. It worried him, however, that the paper gave the impression that HMG gave priority to getting Sinn Fein in. Ministers said they'd had no choice but to respond to Hume, but how did he know who to believe? (I told Trimble separately that there hadn't been any secret Hume "proposals", merely an exchange of views over some months on a text which did no more (or less) than reiterate HMG's known policies: Trimble smiled, and we moved on.)

Decommissioning

5. Trimble said that the UUP had initially held out for decommissioning to take place before Sinn Fein were allowed into the talks. They had gone along with the Mitchell Report's recommendations for parallel decommissioning. But they were concerned at suggestions of further compromise. The Mitchell formula was only acceptable provided decommissioning actually happened, and began at an early stage. It was good that the British Government had now published its legislative proposals. If the Irish Government would follow suit, the right framework would be in place as and when the IRA declared a new, unequivocal ceasefire. But Trimble doubted whether any agreement reached on decommissioning would be used in the near future: there was little sign of IRA readiness to enact a new ceasefire; paramilitary activity was continuing, and no effort was being made to prepare the IRA's troops on the ground for a cessation of hostilities.

Ceasefire

6. Bell asked what kind of language the UUP were looking for from the IRA should they announce a new ceasefire. Trimble said he wanted a commitment to exclusively peaceful means, a permanent end to violence, a willingness to accept decisions reached democratically - in short, the Mitchell principles. There also had to be an end to paramilitary activity on the ground. He was glad that HMG had rejected Irish attempts to fix a timescale for Sinn Fein entering the talks: it was the substance that mattered, not the date. The Armagh bomb could have caused immense injury and damage; and it was worrying that there still seemed to be large quantities of explosives at large in the London area.

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General climate

7. Asked about the mood in Northern Ireland, Trimble said that there was a disturbing level of unease, and a general lack of confidence among Unionists in the British Government's intentions. Worrying hints and rumours had been rife. The Prime Minister's decision to publish his text on 28 November should help to stabilise things. The Loyalist ceasefire remained fragile, but it was vital that it held. If the Loyalists went back to violence, Sinn Fein support would increase significantly. Hence the IRA's attempts to provoke the Loyalists. The British Government's posture was essential to ensuring that these efforts failed: as long as HMG appeared committed to the democratic process, and would not acquiesce in Irish attempts to bring Sinn Fein into the talks at any price, there was a reasonable chance that the Loyalist ceasefire would hold. Loyalist meetings at No 10 had provided helpful reassurance on this point.

Elections

8. Trimble and his colleagues said that Sinn Fein were setting their sights on a Fianna Fail victory. So there were likely to be token gestures, including short-term ceasefires, in the run-up to the Irish elections. They also had hopes of doing well in the UK general election - which was why HMG should not spend the next 3 months giving priority to Sinn Fein demands over getting the SDLP re-engaged. A change of government in the UK would not necessarily mean a change of policy. Blair had been rock-solid on bipartisanship (and there was no love lost between him and John Hume). So far as he could tell, the Nationalists didn't seem to think they would get a better deal from a Labour Government. Trimble's main concern was that a new team would take time to learn the job, so mistakes easily could be made early on.

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