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From the Private Secretary

13 May 1996

See memo.

MEETING WITH THE UUP, 13 MAY

The Prime Minister had a further meeting with David Trimble and Reg Empey on 13 May. John Taylor was not there, because of prior business commitments. Sir Patrick Mayhew and Sir John Wheeler were there on our side. The meeting lasted for some 75 minutes. Despite a plea for confidentiality both at the previous meeting and in setting this one up, news of it had leaked widely by the time it took place, and Trimble's arrival was delayed by his talking to the press in Downing Street(!)

Trimble opened by noting that the IRA's American friends appeared to be turning against them. Recent remarks by Dodds and King in particular were quite remarkable. The Prime Minister agreed. That was why there was an important window of opportunity. President Clinton clearly believed that his prospect of winning the elections would be greater if there was an IRA and progress in the talks.

The Prime Minister asked about Trimble's meeting with the Taoiseach on 10 May. Trimble said that it had been very informal. Bruton was very keen on a new ceasefire. He also wanted to bury the decommissioning issue in a separate stream as suggested by Spring. Trimble had told him that the Unionists would not be able to sit in the talks if there was too long a gap between their beginning and the start of actual decommissioning. He had also told him to look at other confidence-building measures set out by Mitchell. Action on these could help to stretch the decommissioning timetable. Trimble also gave his version of how the supposedly private talks had leaked - needless to say, he blamed the Irish.

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Trimble went on to say that he was worried about the UUP's prospects in the elections. The decision of the electoral officer to allow Paisley to include his name on the ballot paper could cost the UUP between 3 and 5 per cent of their share of the vote. The ballot paper was in general likely to be confusing, and Paisley's name would be one of the few clear things on it. It was clear that this was a deliberate attempt by the Catholic electoral officer to arrange things so that the SDLP would come top in the polls. That concerned him less than the possibility of the UUP doing relatively badly and Paisley doing relatively well. That could only make life more difficult in the negotiations, for example over issues like decommissioning. The UUP had thought of challenging the decision in law but had decided that it would only suit Paisley to be made a martyr. The UUP would therefore just have to do their best in the elections.

Asked about likely shares of the vote, Trimble said that, according to the opinion polls, the UUP should get around 33 per cent and the DUP 15 per cent. But the combination of the Paisley effect and Robert McCartney could push the UUP down as low as 27 or 28 per cent. Meanwhile, the SDLP would do well, because the Catholic church would pull out all the stops as they had done on previous occasions. But Sinn Fein would do well in Belfast.

Trimble continued that he was now convinced that there would be a new IRA ceasefire, but only very shortly before the polling day, and probably in ambiguous terms. Empey agreed that this was probable, but commented that the hard men of the IRA on the ground could still refuse to agree. Trimble said that the IRA ceasefire might be couched in such a way that it was not sufficient to get Sinn Fein into the negotiations. There would then be pressure from the SDLP and the Irish to bring them in somehow, and perhaps from the Americans. US pressure was on the IRA for now, but he suspected that this would change once the negotiations started. The pressure would then come on the Unionists over decommissioning.

The Prime Minister said that if there was no ceasefire, he thought the US role in the negotiations would be marginal. But if there was a ceasefire, they would be heavily involved. The first thing they would want was firm agreement on the Mitchell principles. It was less clear how they would want to use their influence after that. They might be happy to let the negotiations break down, with the blame pinned firmly on the Unionists. But it was more likely that they would want to see progress. This meant that they would have to press for parallel decommissioning. The only interpretation of this was that decommissioning must start during negotiations. He thought the Americans would want to put pressure on both Nationalists and Unionists to achieve this. The question was who would come under more pressure.

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The Prime Minister went on to wonder how decommissioning should be dealt with procedurally. There were various options for the chairmanship. He and Trimble had already agreed that joint chairmanship would be no good. A second possibility would be a new, so far unidentified, figure but this did not look attractive. De Chastelain was certainly possible, but if he was up front, with the Americans in the background, the Americans would not be involved in ensuring a success in quite the same way. So the final option of having Mitchell in the hot seat seemed to be the most attractive. Mitchell would be confined by the need to be consistent with his own report.

Trimble commented that paragraph 34 of the report was not in fact as clear and specific as it might be. It was not a formal recommendation and was conditioned by the word "consider". The Prime Minister agreed, but commented that Mitchell himself had continued to talk of parallel decommissioning. He could not avoid trying to deliver this. Empey saw danger that Mitchell would try to split the difference between what he had said in his report and the Unionist position. The Prime Minister accepted this, but pointed out that this possibility would exist whether the chairman was Mitchell or someone else. In any case, anything less than parallel decommissioning would not attract agreement in the House of Commons, or in Northern Ireland when it came to a referendum. The more he thought about it, the more he believed that the best chance of progress on decommissioning was to put Mitchell in charge of delivering on his own report. The Americans would then be bound to use their influence with the IRA.

Trimble said that he had written to President Clinton asking for assurances about Mitchell. He would need satisfaction on this before agreeing to a role for Mitchell. He understood that assurances like this were not enforceable but they were politically necessary anyway. He noted that John Taylor had mounted a cleverly worded attack on Mitchell on 11 May. This illustrated the difficulty Mitchell's candidature posed.

The Prime Minister asked whether Mitchell should chair anything else besides the plenary. Trimble did not see the need for this, and commented that he saw Mitchell as chairing only the opening session of the plenary, not necessarily anything else. The Prime Minister suggested that Trimble should talk to Mitchell privately himself. There was no substitute for personal attack in issues like this. Empey commented that there were still great suspicions within the UUP about the Americans, particularly individuals like Nancy Soderberg, who had appeared in the past committed to a united Ireland. The Prime Minister commented that there was no possibility of a united Ireland. There was no desire for it, either in Northern Ireland or the Republic. Trimble agreed.

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The Prime Minister attempted to sum up that he and Trimble were not far apart on the question of Mitchell's involvement. One extra element was that the chairmanship of the plenary might be formally with the Irish and British Governments but they would agree to delegate it to Mitchell. This would have the advantage that Mitchell could be got rid of if necessary. As far as de Chastelain was concerned, his best role seemed to be on the practicalities of decommissioning. Trimble agreed with these points. But he added that the details and atmospherics of the negotiations would matter a great deal. The Prime Minister reverted to the question of chairmanship of Strand II. Trimble said that an absolutely neutral chairman was needed. This should not be Mitchell. The Prime Minister raised again the name of Malcolm Fraser. Trimble showed no enthusiasm.

Sir Patrick Mayhew attempted to raise the question of the business committee, whose role had been important in the 1991/92 talks. Trimble said that he preferred to talk about the agenda and procedures. As the Prime Minister would know, the UUP were not too happy with the ground rules paper. The Prime Minister said that his mind was open on the agenda. It would need to be agreed in advance with all the participants, covering all the issues that participants wanted to raise, ensuring confidence-building issues were addressed at the beginning and so on. But we had not yet written down what we thought should be on the agenda itself.

Trimble said that, on procedure, the UUP favoured a single negotiating team to work through the comprehensive agenda. This should encompass the issues in all the strands, but the talks should not be conducted as if there were three separate strands. Of course he realised that there was some Strand III issues which were for the two governments only, but there were others where the parties had an interest too. Moreover, the UUP wanted to start on Strand II and III issues, rather than Strand I. Strand One had been discussed to death in 1991/92, and there was no point in starting on it again now until it was clear that the difficult issues in the other strands could be successfully tackled. Others might well agree with this. For example, the SDLP would not want to spend their time sorting out committees of Stormont, when there were much more important issues to discuss.

Trimble continued that the configuration of any North/South body and its status would be hugely important. It was also vital to get rid of the Anglo/Irish Agreement. The Prime Minister commented that the Irish had agreed in principle that the Anglo/Irish Agreement could be replaced. But he suggested that the discussion of the detailed agenda should be continued between the UUP and NIO Ministers. Trimble agreed.

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Empey raised the possibility of Adams putting the Act of Union on the agenda. He could not be prevented from doing this, but the Unionists would be bound to say they could not negotiate on it. The Prime Minister agreed that Adams might put this on the table, but everyone knew that it was only a fantasy item. The argument was instantly destroyed by the consent principle. The British Government's own views could be deduced from the strong defence of the Union in Scotland.

Trimble said that this was an unfortunate comparison. The British Government seemed to want to appear neutral about the status of Northern Ireland, while defending the Union strongly in Scotland and Wales. This caused resentment. The Prime Minister commented that the situations were entirely different. A violent campaign had been going on in Northern Ireland and the Government had a responsibility to bring this to an end.

Empey raised the question of the Anglo/Irish Conference. It would be much better if this disappeared. Trimble agreed. He was constantly asked about this and did not have a clear answer to give. Sir Patrick Mayhew asked whether the Unionists really wanted to raise this issue now, when the Irish were quiet about it. Trimble commented that the Conference's existence helped to nourish the view that the British and Irish Governments were conspiring together. He was not saying that abolition of the conference was a precondition, but it would certainly help to build confidence. Sir Patrick Mayhew said he would reflect on this but was reluctant to raise the profile of the issue now.

Returning to the prospect of a ceasefire, Empey said that there was no indication that the IRA were going to hang up their boots. The expectations of many in the movement were a very long way from the likely reality, and there would be huge disappointment when this became clear. The armed struggle was therefore likely to continue. The Prime Minister acknowledged the gap between expectation and reality, but said that the IRA had in the past always had external support. If we managed the issues wisely, we could manoeuvre the IRA into a position where violence was no longer an option. Trimble said that the IRA would play it long. They would endeavour to turn the inevitably lengthy negotiations to their advantage, and to enlist the help of their traditional friends. They believed for example that the next Dail and the next British Parliament were likely to be more helpful to them. Sir Patrick Mayhew said that the trick was to expose the IRA as not prepared to move in a democratic direction if that proved to be the case.

Empey asked what the situation would be if Sinn Fein were not in the negotiations. Hume would then hold the key. He doubted Hume would want to be helpful. The Prime Minister commented that Hume too would be under pressure from the Americans, who no longer took such a starry eyed view of

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him. Trimble commented that Mallon's current illness was unfortunate. His style was adversarial but at least straight. Dealing with Hume was like grappling with fog. He thought that, if Bruton stood firm on the need to continue with the negotiations, the SDLP would too. But Bruton was not in a strong position domestically.

Trimble said that he had heard rumours that the Prime Minister was to make a major speech on Northern Ireland this week. The Prime Minister said that this was nonsense. He would be putting an article in the Belfast and Dublin papers, but the text was unremarkable, and aimed to deal with issues of concern to both Unionists and Nationalists.

The meeting concluded with a brief discussion of the press line. Trimble said that he would say as little as possible, but would want to make clear that in his view it was vital to resolve the procedural issues surrounding the 10 June negotiations.

Trimble went on to raise with Sir Patrick Mayhew detailed concerns about the operation of the slaughter scheme for cattle over 30 months in Northern Ireland. He had been unable to make any impression on Mr Hogg's office and asked Sir Patrick Mayhew to look into this.

Comment

This was a reasonably satisfactory meeting. The atmosphere was good throughout, and Trimble did not repeat his insistence on a fixed timetable for decommissioning at the beginning of the negotiations. (But there was nothing to indicate that he had moved away from it either.) The Prime Minister believes that Trimble is now close to accepting the role for Mitchell we have in mind and that this is the way to defuse this issue.

There was a short inconclusive discussion after the meeting about how we should now approach Mitchell. It was possible that a visit by Mr Ancram to Washington would be too high profile. One alternative would be to ask Sir John Kerr to talk to Mitchell. Sir Patrick Mayhew said he would reflect on this further, and on how the papers for NI might be amended to reflect the latest discussions.

We agreed subsequently that, in the light of this conversation with Trimble and the Prime Minister's separate telephone conversation with the Taoiseach, we now need a new game plan dealing with how we approach Mitchell, the US Government, the Irish Government and the other parties. It would be helpful to have advice on all this by the evening of 14 May.

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Meanwhile, it is surprising that we have not had an irate Paisley on the telephone demanding a meeting with the Prime Minister. I suspect this cannot be long delayed. John Hume rang me this afternoon asking why Trimble had had two meetings with the Prime Minister when he had not been able to get in. He was mollified by a promise that the Prime Minister would be publishing an article in the next few days, but will no doubt return to the charge. This points to the need for activity by NIO Ministers to keep the parties other than the UUP sweet.

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

Yum ere

John

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