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PRIV
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From the Private Secretary

5 June 1996

Dear draft,

MEETING WITH DUP

Dr. Paisley and Peter Robinson called on the Prime Minister on 4 June. Sir Patrick Mayhew and Michael Ancram were there on our side.

The Prime Minister began by congratulating Dr. Paisley on his election result, no doubt aided by the trick he had pulled with the Electoral Officer to get his name on the ballot paper. Dr. Paisley said that Trimble could have had his name on the ballot paper too, but his party had not allowed it.

Paisley said that he was in a state of ignorance about preparations for the talks, while Trimble seemed to know everything and be able to make announcements about it, for example about the first meeting of the Forum. The Prime Minister confirmed that the Forum could meet on 14 June. The talks themselves would start on 10 June as scheduled. He did not expect an IRA ceasefire but thought that Sinn Fein would turn up at the talks, with the cameras. They would not of course get in.

Paisley and Robinson then put a series of detailed questions to Sir Patrick Mayhew about the location of the Forum, the possible layout, the procedural rules, the interim chairman (Paisley suggested it should be the oldest member), whether the Union flag would fly over the building, and payment for staff for the parties. The question of payment seemed to worry Robinson particularly. He commented that the Northern Ireland parties had very few resources of their own.

Paisley then came to the 10 June talks. What exactly would happen on 10 June? Sir Patrick Mayhew went through our proposals: proceedings to be opened probably by the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach; statements from the parties accepting the Mitchell principles; joint statement on the Mitchell principles; round of opening statements by the parties. Robinson asked whether they could see a form of words for the joint statement in advance. The Prime Minister confirmed this. Paisley asked about the position with the PUP and the UDP. If they signed up to the Mitchell principles, how could they be allowed to hang on to their arms?

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Robinson asked about chairmanships. Sir Patrick Mayhew and the Prime Minister explained our position, but made clear that we had not yet agreed anything with the Irish Government. Robinson said that no names had been put to the DUP. The ground rules clearly said that parties had to be consulted about the candidates for chairmanship. This applied to the chairman of Strand 2 for example.

Robinson asked whether we envisaged Mitchell chairing the plenary. The Prime Minister confirmed this and explained our thinking. Paisley said that the idea of a continuing plenary chaired by Mitchell in this way was new, and it would be very difficult to get agreement to it. The Prime Minister explained that we were anxious to avoid stories of secret deals. It was better that everyone knew what was going on in all Strands. This led to the idea of them reporting back to the plenary, but this did not mean that we were giving Mitchell influence over Strands 2 and 3. Paisley said that chairmanship of the plenary was still the key role. Giving it to Mitchell would bring down the furies on the Government's head. The Prime Minister said that it had not been his first instinct to go for an American in this position, but he had become convinced that this was the best way forward, not least to ensure that if all went wrong, the blame rested where it belonged. Mitchell was also a good and skilful politician. Paisley recalled that Mitchell had been one of those who had sponsored the first US visa for Gerry Adams and repeated the dangers of his involvement in plenary.

Robinson asked whether, if there was no decommissioning during the talks, this would stop the talks process. The Prime Minister said that that was not our intention. If there had been no progress by the end of the review period in September, it would obviously be right to remove from the negotiations those who were blocking this process.

Paisley expressed concern about the success of Sinn Fein in the elections. This was a further chapter in the usual history of Republicanism: the extremists were taking over the moderates and the SDLP was in danger of being swallowed up. The Prime Minister said that he was inclined to agree. Many voters had probably concluded that there was no point in voting for the party sheltering Sinn Fein, when they could vote for Sinn Fein itself. But this must be causing distress to SDLP leaders other than Hume. Mallon would no doubt take the party in a different direction.

Discussion then returned to the detail of how the business committee for the talks might work, and the timing of meetings of the different Strands in the talks, of the Forum, and of the Forum's committees. Sir Patrick Mayhew said that information would be going out to all the parties about all these points in the next few days.

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Robinson returned to decommissioning. The Prime Minister went through our ideas for a sub-committee of the plenary, and a review of the position in September. He did not expect much to happen in the second half of July and August, so that September was in practice not too far away. Sir Patrick Mayhew added that the Irish Government and the parties would have to confirm their commitment to the Mitchell compromise before the sub-committee was set up.

Robinson asked what would happen if Sinn Fein joined the talks at a later stage. Would everything start again? Michael Ancram said that, if Sinn Fein qualified at a later stage through a ceasefire, they would have to join the train wherever the train then was. There could be no going back to the beginning. Robinson then asked how parties who were not at meetings in the talks which they were entitled to attend, for example sessions of the plenary, would be kept informed of proceedings. Sir Patrick Mayhew said that proceedings would be confidential, but he imagined there would be a reporting procedure for the parties so that all concerned knew what had been said.

Robinson returned to the question of rooms for staff members of parties and funding arrangements. Sir Patrick Mayhew promised to look into the latter point in more detail and be in touch with the DUP.

Comment

This was a curious, low-key, bitty meeting (which the Prime Minister left for another appointment a few minutes before the end). Paisley was back in jovial form, although not accommodating on substance. Robinson was keenly interested in the nitty gritty of the arrangements for both the Forum and the talks. Neither said in terms that they would not be at the talks, although one or two of Robinson's questions suggested that they did not expect to be there, at least at the beginning. There was no overt criticism of the Government, or sharp exchanges. Paisley reserved these for his discussion with the press afterwards (the Prime Minister had told him before leaving that he could repeat anything that had been said to him except where we had revealed our disagreements with the Irish).

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

Yours ever
John
JOHN HOLMES

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