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Reference Code: 2021/98/5

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Oifig an Taoisigh
Office of the Taoiseach

7 May, 1996.

The Rt. Hon John Major M.P.
Prime Minister.

Dear *John*

Thank you for your letter of 30th April.

I agree completely on the need for a clear understanding between us on the decommissioning issue. Such agreement would also be the soundest basis on which to co-ordinate our public positions.

As regards a "premature" public debate, we have both been grappling with this issue very publicly since the Secretary of State's speech in Washington in March 1995, and before. We made very clear that we are just as committed as you are to achieving decommissioning but that an unrealistic approach to it could well wreck the ceasefire, and thereby, of course, the prospect of any progress on decommissioning also. That concern is just as relevant now to our attempts to restore the ceasefire.

We have consistently sought to be supportive on decommissioning, through setting up the Mitchell Commission, through our position on the election

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process you subsequently said was needed to help you on this issue, and in the terms of the February Communiqué.

In spite of this, and with only a few weeks to go to the 10th June, it remains apparently as uncertain as ever whether this issue will derail the negotiations. We must prevent it from doing so, through a practical approach which is fair to the concerns of both sides.

The Tánaiste's proposal is broadly in line with the Mitchell report. I believe that it is a sensible and practical method of taking forward the Mitchell recommendations. A specific fourth stream of negotiations is indicated anyway by the anomalous nature of this agenda item. More importantly, by taking the initial burden on the Governments' broader shoulders, we could give the unionist parties space to treat this as a problem to be resolved pragmatically in the course of negotiations, rather than putting them in a position where they would be compelled to take, at the very outset, public positions which could, if maintained, logjam the negotiations before they had really started. I believe some of them at least are disposed to take a realistic approach, provided our management of the problem is sufficiently adept to get them off hooks.

I realise that the way this issue has been brought to dominate the political debate imposes constraints on you. I fear however the focus on it here means that the Irish Government cannot avoid addressing publicly the widespread concern that the negotiations will founder on this, or become hostage to an idealistic - and unachievable - view of it.

Even if we did not have to address publicly these concerns, which also feature very centrally in the ongoing debate on renewing the ceasefire, it would in any case be very unwise to go into the negotiating chamber with no clear formula to handle this very destabilising question. Nobody has anything to gain from a dramatic public failure.

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If we assume we can find agreement on it in a few weeks time, we should be able to do so now. That would give an invaluable boost to the confidence that it is so important to build at this juncture. Conversely, if there is no possibility of agreement now, the prognosis for the negotiations is poor. Given the extent to which we have staked our credibility on a meaningful process, we would in that case need to turn our minds to the political management of more pessimistic scenarios. In either case we need to know where we are going.

Your reference to Senator Mitchell suggests that you may have received an incomplete and hence distorted impression of what happened. The Tánaiste was asked a direct question at the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body and responded, non-committally, that it was premature to speculate on personalities, while of course paying due tribute to Senator Mitchell's high achievement in relation to the International Body.

I fully agree with you on the need for us to continue to work closely together, not only on decommissioning but also on the many other issues which face us in the peace process.

One thought I would leave with you for consideration is that, as discussed with your Ambassador on Wednesday evening, you might make a public statement, in some form that would have a strong impact, affirming that the negotiations to commence on 10th June will be serious and meaningful, and, possibly, also referring to my Finglas speech as having made a strong case, with which you associate yourself, for the restoration of the ceasefire. It is clear to us from official-level contacts with Sinn Féin that such a public statement by you could be of great importance in reinforcing the strong efforts we are making to convince the Republican movement to make a definitive choice in favour of exclusively democratic and peaceful means.

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Before closing, I should mention that I have discussed with the Minister for Agriculture, Food and Forestry the position in regard to the BSE crisis, including his recent remarks. You may be assured that on our side we are very conscious of the problems you face. There is no country in Europe more dependent on beef production and exports than Ireland and, accordingly, more threatened if a crisis of consumer confidence is prolonged. We are therefore very anxious and prepared to work constructively, including in our forthcoming EU Presidency, to reach agreements which will be effective in solving this formidable problem. We have indicated our strong view, in the Council of Ministers, that the EU should show solidarity with the U.K. on this matter.

On European issues generally, I suggested to Ambassador Sutherland on Wednesday last that it may be useful if we have, before too long and with a view to the Irish Presidency, a separate conversation about these issues.

I look forward to speaking to you on the telephone tomorrow morning to review where the various matters referred to above, and discussed between John Holmes and Paddy Teahon, stand and how we can make further progress on them quickly.

With kind regards.

Yours sincerely,





10 DOWNING STREET
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STRICTLY PERSONAL AND CONFIDENTIAL
THE PRIME MINISTER

30 April 1996

The cooperation between our two Governments over the Northern Ireland peace process has been particularly good in recent weeks, and I am most grateful for that. As we have often agreed, we need to work closely together if we are to find our way through the many delicate issues which still confront us.

May I ask your understanding and help, therefore, over a matter that is causing me difficulty. It relates to the particularly sensitive issue of decommissioning, in the context of the remarks apparently made by the Tanaiste to the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body last night. His comments about possible arrangements for discussion of decommissioning in parallel with the main talks, and about the chances of involving Senator Mitchell in the negotiations, have been widely replayed here. Your Ambassador will no doubt have reported the immediate negative reactions from the Unionists and others.

We are currently engaged in consideration of the way forward, prior to discussing the possibilities further with you and with the Northern Ireland parties. A premature public debate prejudices our ultimate ability to persuade, and in this case has certainly increased our difficulties here - with the parties and with Parliament.

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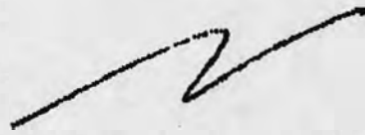
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We need to agree on where we are going before we go public if we are to have any chance of success.

Perhaps I may also take this opportunity to say that remarks by your Agriculture Minister reported here today, to the effect that Britain was not taking enough action over BSE and was effectively prolonging the crisis through extra health scares, were extremely unhelpful. The crisis over the safety of beef is one which threatens all our industries. We need to work together to find a solution. Beggar my neighbour attitudes will certainly not contribute to this end.

I know John Holmes has spoken to Paddy Teahon about this, but I wanted you to be aware personally of my great concern on both these issues.

Yours Every
John



Mr John Bruton TD

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