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20 October 1998

No of pages including this one: 3

To: HQ
For: Secretary Gallagher

From: Belfast
From: Joint Secretary

Subj: Prime Minister's meetings with McGuinness and Trimble (19 Oct)

1. We have had the following read-out on the Prime Minister's meetings yesterday with, respectively, Martin McGuinness and David Trimble.
2. The Prime Minister described his meeting with McGuinness, at which no others were present, as "going round and round in circles". McGuinness had offered nothing new and had made clear that Sinn Féin had no room for manoeuvre, whether in terms of an act of decommissioning, a timetable or "an explosion in the woods". He had defended Sinn Féin's position in detail and had called on the two Governments to apply pressure to Trimble. The Prime Minister characterised the discussion, which ended inconclusively, as "disappointing if still amicable". He also judged that McGuinness had been giving him an honest account of where Sinn Féin believed matters stood at present.
3. At the subsequent meeting with Trimble, the Prime Minister had been accompanied by Jonathan Powell and Alistair Campbell. Trimble had been accompanied by John Taylor, David Lavery and David Kerr.

The Prime Minister characterised this as a friendly discussion in which Trimble and Taylor had been "not unreasonable". However, they had not accepted his suggestion that Sinn Féin should be allowed into the shadow Executive on the basis of knowledge that decommissioning would definitely happen within the two-year timescale. They had emphasised that "a nod and a wink" from Sinn Féin would not be enough. They would have to have something public to point to. They had also made clear, however, that they were not seeking to exclude Sinn Féin.

Trimble observed at one point that Sinn Féin had mentioned to the UUP their general problems with decommissioning but had left open the possibility that these problems might ease with time. Trimble suggested to the Prime Minister that, if he had an indication that decommissioning could not happen now but might be possible at a later stage, this would at least enable him to ask Sinn Féin in what circumstances it would be possible.

He also indicated that, if the Irish Government felt ready to agree at some point to a meeting of the North-South Ministerial Council, "everything could be cobbled together quite quickly". By this he evidently meant that the substantive preparations for agreement on the implementation bodies etc were advancing to a point where the shadow NSMC could be convened at quite short notice. He claimed that a lot of progress was being made between the UUP and the SDLP ("six areas have been agreed"); that "civil servants are looking at the various ideas"; and that he himself would be discussing them with Seamus Mallon later this week. He expressed the view that, on this basis, the 31 October deadline could be "substantially met". He hoped that he might be in a position to deliver a report to this effect at the Assembly's next meeting on 26 October.

This is quite misleading a mention etc on this as he circled later today

Finally, the British view of today's phone conversation between the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach (as conveyed in an internal note by John Holmes which also provides additional detail on yesterday's meetings) is as follows.

The Prime Minister told the Taoiseach that his discussion with McGuinness had not been helpful. The latter had said that Sinn Féin could not deliver decommissioning, though they might be able to do so in future (just as they had eventually delivered the IRA ceasefire).

Trimble, the Prime Minister continued, had seemed flexible on other ways forward. (Comment: This seems to have been a reference to Trimble's remarks about the work being done in preparation for the first NSMC meeting). However, he had his party conference coming up and his party were not willing to allow Sinn Féin into the shadow Executive on a conditional basis.

The Prime Minister could not see a way out for the moment. He noted, however,

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that both Trimble and Taylor were saying that they wanted Sinn Féin in the new administration and that McGuinness, for his part, was saying that he recognised that decommissioning would have to be dealt with. The Prime Minister hoped that De Chastelain might be able to find a way out; however, the General could not say at present that he was convinced that decommissioning would happen.

The Prime Minister referred to an idea mentioned by Trimble to the effect that (a) the shadow Executive, which has no statutory role, could be dispensed with; and (b) Trimble might establish an informal committee which "could at least get the North/South bodies going". Even for the latter, however, Trimble would need some indication of movement down the road in relation to decommissioning.

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responsible!*

The Taoiseach, the note from Holmes continues, wondered whether it might be possible to establish the Executive proper in advance of February. The Prime Minister noted that Trimble had suggested that this could be brought forward to the third week of November if necessary. Trimble had suggested that Sinn Féin could be admitted to the Executive at that point - but only on the basis of an act of decommissioning. The Prime Minister believed that the UUP would be willing to interpret the latter as meaning "an explosion in the woods". McGuinness, however, had made clear to the Prime Minister that decommissioning even in this form was not possible at present.

The Prime Minister told the Taoiseach that he did not understand how the IRA could object to "an explosion in the woods" which, after all, would not require them to issue any statement. The Taoiseach did not dissent but observed generally that the IRA feared that, if they were to do something on decommissioning, the Unionists would simply erect some other obstacle. He also referred to different signals coming from different parts of the Republican community.

The Prime Minister concluded by emphasising the need for himself and the Taoiseach to "keep the foot on the accelerator".