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FROM: R P LEMON
PS/Michael Ancram
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DESK IMMEDIATE

cc PS/Sir John Wheeler (B&L) - B
PS/Michael Ancram (B&L) - B
PS/PUS (B&L) - B
PS/Sir David Fell - B
Mr Thomas - B
Mr Steele - B
Mr Watkins - B
Mr Leach - B
Mr Bell - B
Mr Stephens - B
Mr Wood (B&L) - B
Mr Lavery - B
Mr Hill - B
Mr Perry - B
Mr Maccabe - B
Mr Beeton - B
Mr Brooker - B
Mr Priestly - B
Mr Whysall - B
Ms Mapstone - B
Ms Bharucha - B

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PS/Secretary of State (B&L) - B

MICHAEL ANCRAM'S MEETING WITH MR TRIMBLE, 23 JANUARY 1997

Following the Prime Minister's meeting with the UUP on 21 January when Michael Ancram promised to meet Mr Trimble again to discuss ideas on decommissioning, a meeting took place in the Minister's room in the House on 23 January. Trimble was unaccompanied, Mr Thomas and I were also present. The meeting lasted about 45 minutes.

Summary

2. Trimble was in a relatively reasonable mood. He said HMG's ideas did not go far enough but added that he did not want to be the one who walked out of the talks. He wanted a 'communication cord' to halt the talks, if required. He accepted that page 1 of the UUP document could be jettisoned and added that he needed a firm commitment from the Irish and the SDLP.

3. In the course of the meeting he identified without commitment a number of components which might provide assurance. These were: greater clarity and definition about the procedure Sinn Fein would follow after entry; a "communication cord" to be available to the

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BB/MOFS/12201

CONFIDENTIAL

SEP during the political Talks if insufficient progress on decommissioning; and the idea of looping back to the Plenary to test Sinn Fein's commitment and intentions.

4. Trimble presented himself as interested in pursuing a deal rather than abandoning the process.

Detail

5. The Minister began by saying that it was important to keep the talks process going and on track and to do this it was necessary to keep some people on board. This might be achieved in three ways. First the SDLP had to be kept on board and needed to see some way through to full negotiations and the three strands; secondly it had to be done in a way which was consistent with the agreed agenda; and thirdly the UUP view had to be taken into consideration. Trimble did not demur from this analysis. On the UUP paper, the Minister said that he was concerned that the content of the first page was in conflict with the statutory basis for the Talks. He said HMG was looking for some way to bridge the decommissioning gap, not to move straightaway to substantive negotiations but to say that we would look at it after elections, thereby leaving a gap in which some of those UUP ideas could fill a dangerous vacuum. He said it was unlikely SDLP would co-operate with an economic and social agenda in place of Talks. The Minister emphasised that he had not discussed this with the Irish or the SDLP.

6. The Minister said there were two elements to a potential package, still to be fully worked up. The first was confidence building measures and the idea that a sub-committee, chaired by the chairperson of the plenary, would be responsible for looking at CBM's and consider any measures which the parties might raise. At this point Trimble asked, smiling, 'refer them to the Forum?' (The manner in which Trimble said this and that he did not follow it up suggests he is not completely serious.) The Minister said that there would also be a guarantee that parallel decommissioning would take place.

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Trimble said that he was satisfied that Spring and John Hume were determined that decommissioning would never happen. He called them 'duplicitous' on this. The Minister said that at some stage there would be an expectation that decommissioning would happen but Trimble said that there was nothing time-specific included in that scenario and he could not let the process slip into the hands of others without a copper fastened guarantee. He said he could not survive talking to Sinn Fein without something happening on decommissioning and needed 'something firmer than that'. Michael Ancram said that the idea of a fixed schedule, or a tranche in advance, would not be bought by the Irish. On mention of the Irish, Trimble said that he distrusted Spring and Hume and they both wanted Sinn Fein in and didn't want decommissioning to happen. He asked what procedures would apply if Sinn Fein "showed at the gate after a ceasefire". Michael Ancram said that if a ceasefire had been declared and Sinn Fein had been invited in, having examined words and actions, they would have to demonstrate to both Governments their commitment, just as other parties had already stated theirs, to the Mitchell principles. Mr Thomas said that the Mitchell report envisaged a mutual and benign dynamic in which there would be an expectation that decommissioning would take place. Trimble said that he wanted to be able to "pull the communication cord" rather than pull the plug. He wanted to be able to stop things moving if necessary and to avoid putting the fate of Northern Ireland into the hands of others. He repeated again his line about the Irish and Hume, namely that it was their first priority to get Sinn Fein into talks. He said that he did not want to put himself in the position where he had to walk out of Talks, but said this package was too weak.

8. Mr Thomas said that it might be that the choice^{was} between deadlock or all the parties accepting a way forward, which in some respects everyone would not like. The Minister asked if there was anything in what Trimble had heard that he could live with. Trimble said he could not live with what he had heard, there was too much fudge, not enough assurances. He said HMG needed to look at the procedure on entry (he did not expand further). Mr Thomas said that physical decommissioning simply would not happen in advance, so

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BB/MOFS/12201

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Should a firm commitment be enough? Trimble said no, evidence of good faith was required and if they came in they would have to satisfy HMG and then the Unionists of that good faith. The Minister asked about the loyalists' parties commitment. Trimble said that they were different, they 'started off with some advantages'.

7. Trimble said that the reality was that there was no way that Sinn Fein could be admitted 'as things are'. He said talks could go on without them and there comes a point where leaving the door opens ceases to become credible. The Minister asked Trimble if there was any chance of movement before Monday, because if not, we may have to accept returning to the same road block. Michael Ancram said he was not at this time looking for a firm commitment, but rather some indication, for example a shared and public statement? Trimble said that a return to the familiar road block would not be an enthralling prospect and repeated his desire for a 'communication cord'. He added that HMG may be about to disappear, a further factor. The Minister said that it may reappear! He said that in any event he had no reason to think that Labour had a different view on decommissioning. Trimble said again that he did not want to walk out but that if there was 'something dodgy' he would have to.

8. The Minister said that if we could not bridge this gap, he would want to be sure that the talks were ended in a way that there was a return after an election. Trimble agreed and added there must be some 'automatic come back to Talks'.

9. The Minister noted again HMG's difficulty with page one of the UUP paper. Trimble, almost casually, said that the first page could be jettisoned and the paper could have been better. He said HMG should get something on paper. It was agreed that the Minister and he would meet early on Monday and might talk by phone before then.

(SIGNED)

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