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13 April 1998

From the Principal Private Secretary

Dear [REDACTED],

NORTHERN IRELAND SETTLEMENT: FINAL NEGOTIATIONS

Alert readers will have noticed that the supply of meeting records dried up on 9 April, victim of a combination of exhaustion and the speed at which events were moving. It may therefore be useful if I try to give a broad account of events following our arrival in Belfast on 7 April, as seen from the Prime Minister's office, in particular the dramatic events of 9 and 10 April. This letter does not attempt to describe all the hard and successful negotiating going on elsewhere, particularly on Strand One, where we were relatively little involved or all the meetings. It is therefore necessarily partial and incomplete but I hope it captures at least some of the flavour as we saw it.

Tuesday 7 April

The situation looked bleak as we arrived in Belfast late on Tuesday afternoon. The decision by Mitchell to insist on including in the text put on the table late on Monday night two long unagreed annexes of issues for North-South co-operation had pushed the Unionists over the edge. They also found the sections on rights, policing, prisoners etc, which they had not seen before, too green for their taste. We therefore invited Trimble to Hillsborough immediately after our arrival, to allow him to explain at length his objections to the text. With the important exceptions of the North-South section and decommissioning, these objections did not seem insuperable. As important, he still seemed interested in a deal.

Meetings with Alderdice and Ervine later that evening showed that Unionist concerns were more widely shared, and that there would have to be

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meanwhile turned very negative and it looked as if they were preparing to disassociate themselves from any agreement.

However a series of meetings over the night of 9/10 April with Dr Mowlam; Ahern and the Prime Minister separately; two very long meetings with just the Prime Minister and Ahern on one side, and Adams and McGuinness on the other; and a 3 a.m. telephone call to Adams from Clinton, seemed to turn the tide. No concessions were made on Sinn Fein demands, but their concerns were listened to. Dr Mowlam wrote a letter of comfort on some of the issues. The Prime Minister promised to meet Adams after Easter to discuss them further. It eventually became clear early in the morning of 10 April that, while they would not sign up to the deal on the spot, not least because of their annual conference a week later, they were ready to make positive noises about it and argue for it. It was made clear in return that, while we would stick for now to the planned two year release deadline for prisoners, we would be ready to advance this if Sinn Fein did sign up and circumstances allowed.

Meanwhile the deal on Strand 2 had indeed unblocked Strand 1. The SDLP's patience was rewarded and the UUP accepted early on Friday morning the essence of what they had rejected for so long: a Northern Ireland executive, with a First Minister and First Deputy Minister, and a reasonable form of sufficient cross-community consensus for voting on key issues. Other pieces of the jigsaw had also fallen into place, with new words on decommissioning and policing agreed, and the UUP having finally accepted the Irish amendments to Articles 2 and 3 (despite having deluded themselves that a better offer was on the way).

Friday 10 April

All now looked set for agreement, and the early morning of Good Friday was spent tidying up texts for later circulation to the parties (most of whom had seen no new text since Monday and knew little of what had been going on); and preparing words for use if and when agreement was reached. Exhaustion was combined with a degree of satisfaction and optimism. But we were also uncomfortably aware that there was bound to be a last minute obstacle, and that the UUP would no doubt find reasons to dislike the texts when they saw them again.

Before they could even be circulated, a mini-crisis arose over the Annex listing the areas where separate or joint North-South implementation bodies

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would be set up. The Irish had been unhappy with the number of areas on this list (12), together with the fact that few of them were what they wanted. They had pressed throughout for an Irish Language Promotion Body and a Trade Promotion and Indigenous Company Development Body. The UUP had resisted both fiercely, one on political grounds and the other because of competition worries.

The Irish claimed to have persuaded the UUP at some time during the night to accept both (through a conversation with Ken Maginnis and a young UUP staffer in the bar). We stupidly took their word for it. When the UUP saw the new list, they blew a fuse, accused the Irish of duplicity and refused to accept any more than the original list. The Irish in turn dug in their heels, and a lengthy impasse followed, with Mitchell (whose role in the previous 48 hours had effectively been zero) unable to circulate a new text and getting increasingly angry. We were also tearing our hair out.

Eventually, the Prime Minister brought Ahern and Trimble together again. Trimble had been given fierce instructions by his colleagues not to accept another body, or not to bother coming back. He was adamant. Ahern pressed but in vain. Eventually Trimble, at his most boorish, was persuaded to propose again a pretty meaningless health body. We sold this to an unhappy Ahern on the basis of an additional reference in the text to other bodies being considered, and an exchange of letters with Trimble where Ahern set out four Irish requests again, and Trimble agreed to consider them later.

This fudge allowed the text to be circulated around midday. We sat back and waited for the next problems. They were not long in arriving but were worse than we had anticipated. First the UUP insisted that the Anglo-Irish Secretariat at Maryfield be closed by the end of the year. But the Irish were resistant to further concessions to the UUP. Then the Unionists wanted to change the wording on decommissioning. We told them it was impossible.

But it quickly became clear that Trimble's troops were in general revolt, particularly his young staffers, but also major figures like Donaldson. Faced with the prospect of selling to their community a deal involving Sinn Fein at the Assembly and Government table with no guarantee of decommissioning, with all prisoners out in two years, at least severe doubts about the future of the RUC, a new relationship with Dublin, and a nationalist hold on major Assembly decisions, they were losing their nerve. The precise cause varied over the hours.

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First, it was prisoners. We provided written comfort on how the scheme would work. Then it was policing. Then it was decommissioning.

The Prime Minister spoke to Trimble several times on the phone. He wrote to Trimble unilaterally agreeing that Maryfield would close by the end of the year. We enlisted David Montgomery. We deployed the big picture arguments we could. But Trimble still seemed to be losing the argument (and to share most of his colleagues' reservation). It began to look hopeless, and despair took hold.

Trimble eventually brought Taylor, Empey, Maginnis and Donaldson up to see the Prime Minister. All effectively said the text was unacceptable and unsaleable to Unionists. The Prime Minister let his despair show, but said he was ready to help if he could, but not by reopening the text itself. The delegation made clear that the single biggest issue was the prospect of sitting round the Cabinet table with Sinn Fein when there had been no decommissioning. The Prime Minister promised to consider this.

When they had left, we concocted a letter to Trimble making clear that, if after 6 months of the Assembly the present rules to promote non-violent methods had proved ineffective, we would support changing the rules to give them teeth. We sent this off without much hope, and meanwhile enlisted Clinton's help through a direct phone call to Trimble. The cause still looked all but hopeless, although Trimble had said one or two things which suggested he was determined to make his colleagues swallow the agreement. Meanwhile the other delegations were getting restive and suspicious that Mitchell had still not been able to call the expected plenary to ratify agreement; and the press outside, who had thought it was all over bar the shouting, were just beginning to get wind that we might be in serious trouble.

Suddenly, at about 1630, the picture changed again. Rumours reached us that, following the Prime Minister's letter, and Clinton's call, Trimble had taken renewed heart and called a vote, which he had narrowly won. This seemed too good to be true, but Trimble quickly rang to confirm that the way was now clear for the plenary to be held, and Mitchell arranged it for 1700.

The plenary itself was relatively devoid of drama. No-one pressed any amendments, though Adams insisted that a paper on Sinn Fein "Issues of Concern" be entered into the record. The vote was swift. All said yes except Adams, who said he was "very positive" about the text but would have to consu

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his Annual Conference first. Trimble said he would have to consult his Executive Committee and full Executive Council, but was voting yes anyway. And that was it. There was no applause when sufficient consensus was achieved - just a stunned silence.

After votes of thanks from all parties to Mitchell and his co-chairmen, the Prime Minister and Ahern rushed out to make their planned statements to the waiting media, while Mitchell held a ceremonial closing meeting to allow all the participants to say their piece. Immediately after the press conference, we left for London, completely drained by the roller-coaster nightmare of the previous three days and scarcely able to believe what had happened.

Comment

We all now face the questions of whether the settlement can hold, and how to build momentum through the referendum and the Assembly elections. The UUP are the biggest problem. Trimble passed his first test on Saturday reasonably well, and seems confident of passing the second, at the meeting of his full Executive, next Saturday. But he is in particular danger from his parliamentary party, and badly needs Jeffrey Donaldson onside (we will work on him directly and through Jim Molyneaux). The prospect of opposition to the settlement not only from Paisley and McCartney but also from a large slice of UUP opinion, is worrying.

On the other side, it is hard to believe Adams will not face an uphill task. He has not got a huge amount to show for the settlement, beyond prisoners, and has to sign up very explicitly to the consent principle. Some at least of his followers, not least in the IRA, are likely to find this too hard and may split away. But so far he seems confident.

The other obvious immediate threat is from extreme republican/loyalist violence. The security forces on both sides of the border will need to be at their most alert over the next few weeks. A major terrorist bomb or political assassination could upset all present calculations.

In the slightly longer term, we have to address seriously the fear about politicians sitting in the Assembly and the Northern Ireland Administration while their private armies remain intact and ready to go again. The difficulties are obvious but the Irish, the US Administration and the SDLP all signalled on Good Friday that they thought, with a settlement in place, the time really would have

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come for disarmament. We must find a way of getting this through to Sinn Fein and the loyalists.

Also in the longer term, the building of trust is essential. The Prime Minister believes there is a reasonable chance that the parties will co-operate properly if there are good positive votes in the referendum and Assembly elections and the right momentum can be built. But the Ulster Unionists will remain difficult to deal with. The fact that we were only able to reach a deal on the key issues by keeping them and the Irish apart, because of their deep mutual suspicions, is not a good sign for the future. In particular there are bound to be fierce arguments about the cross-border bodies - which 6 will be set up? All sides have the Sword of Damocles of the "mutually assured destruction" clauses written into the text hanging over them. This, if not more positive thoughts, should help to keep their minds focussed on the tasks in hand. But we will have to work very hard too.

I am copying this to John Grant (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), Jan Polley (Cabinet Office), Sir Christopher Meyer (Washington) and Veronica Sutherland (Dublin).

Yours sincerely
Monica Jewery

PP JOHN HOLMES

