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SECRET

**Key Points in Taoiseach's Phone Conversation with
British Prime Minister on Friday, 11 July, 1997.**

1. The Prime Minister expressed appreciation for the Government's statement of 10 July in response to the Orange Order's decision of the same date on parades.
2. On the decommissioning issue, Prime Minister Blair said that the British Government were making some progress with Mr. Trimble, although it was still quite difficult, as Mr. Trimble was coming under intense attack. Mr. Blair referred to ongoing efforts to put together a sort of scheme for talking about decommissioning so that something was at least happening if the talks got underway properly in September ; and Mr. Trimble's need to be able to say that it was possible that decommissioning should happen. The Prime Minister added that, whatever about the horrendous problems caused by Drumcree, it at least had had the positive effect of allowing Mr. Trimble to come along some way on decommissioning.
3. The Taoiseach expressed appreciation for the opportunity to have had an input into the reply issued by the British to Sinn Féin, which he described as very positive. He underlined the importance of making progress in the talks process in order to restore Nationalist confidence after Drumcree. He also emphasised the importance of sticking to the joint paper on decommissioning. In doing so, he warned that the proposed British response to Mr. Trimble's request for clarification of the paper could run the risk of upsetting the balance achieved in the paper - and of leaving the Governments open to the accusation of offering different interpretations to Sinn Féin and to the UUP. The Taoiseach warned in particular of the dangers of saying that decommissioning could be set up without the involvement of the

parties or that it could take place before there had been at least some progress in the substantive negotiations.

4. Prime Minister Blair agreed on the need to avoid saying different things to the different sides. The question was how what was said was to be interpreted - viz. as between that there must be decommissioning during negotiations or there must be a rational possibility of decommissioning during negotiations. Mr. Blair emphasised the UUP's concern to avoid a situation where in effect Sinn Féin were given a veto over decommissioning. What it came down to was that there must be some possibility, "even likelihood", that decommissioning would happen during negotiations without saying to Sinn Féin that unless there was decommissioning upfront, they couldn't come into the talks - or saying to Unionists that it was only if Sinn Féin wanted, that any decommissioning would happen at all.
5. The Taoiseach underlined the importance of the requirement for talks participants to sign up to the principle of non-violence. He also referred to the wording of paragraphs 34 and 35 of the International Body Report. ("Consider").
6. The Prime Minister indicated that in his view, Mitchell was clearly contemplating that there should be decommissioning during the negotiations rather than before or after. He added, however, that he was aware of the dangers of over-definition in this area.
7. The Taoiseach referred to concerns that a written response to Mr. Trimble could be interpreted as a second joint paper.
8. Prime Minister Blair returned to the question of the interpretation of paragraphs 34 and 35, as he wished to avoid any misunderstanding between himself and the Taoiseach on this point. He indicated that his reading of the paragraphs was that the intention, "at the very least", was that there should be decommissioning during the negotiations and he added that he would lose the Unionists altogether if he was

unable to say this. Mr. Blair indicated that he was at the same time conscious of the need to avoid losing Sinn Féin.

9. The Taoiseach noted that, following Drumcree, Mr. Trimble owed the Prime Minister one. Mr. Blair agreed. He added that he felt - although he could be proved wrong - that if there were an early ceasefire - with no more killings - the decommissioning issue would recede greatly.
10. The Taoiseach responded that he believed that if we got over the weekend and got the clarification process right, we had a great chance of moving things on. It was all the more important to avoid being knocked off course over decommissioning.
11. Prime Minister Blair agreed that there was an opportunity to make progress. He indicated that he would be as sensitive as he could on decommissioning - although we should keep in mind his need to have regard to the concerns on the other side.
12. The Taoiseach indicated that he understood this but reiterated his earlier warning against having two positions on the decommissioning issue.
13. The Prime Minister suggested that the easiest way to resolve the issue would be for the Taoiseach to say that of course people want decommissioning during negotiations - which stopped short of saying that there was an obligation to decommission. For his part, the Prime Minister could say that the intention of Mitchell was that there should be decommissioning during negotiations, which would take him one millimetre - but an important millimetre - away from saying that decommissioning should happen during the negotiations. What we had got to avoid was a situation where the Prime Minister was saying in effect that the Unionists could veto the talks if they didn't get decommissioning or where the Taoiseach was saying there was no way that Sinn Féin could do anything , other than if they decided they wanted to.

14. The Taoiseach responded that he would be urging that decommissioning was an important aspect of the talks process and if the talks were going well, decommissioning should take place in a voluntary way.
15. The Prime Minister responded that while he understood what the Taoiseach meant in using the word "voluntary", it would be helpful if he were instead to use language which focussed more on the linkage between political progress and decommissioning.
16. The Taoiseach said that he would take care in what he said on decommissioning: he was not going to start saying that it could not happen. At the same time, he knew that if he were to say that there had to be decommissioning, we would lose Sinn Féin.
17. Prime Minister Blair commented that we had to avoid defining what was an ambiguity (Paras 34 and 35) in such a way as to undermine the attempt to get everybody on board. He promised that the British side would keep in touch, including in particular as regards how they proposed to respond to Mr. Trimble's letter.
18. The Taoiseach noted that consideration would need to be given to Plan B, against a situation where Mr. Trimble did not come through on 23 July, although he added that it was perhaps too early to be thinking about this. The Prime Minister commented that the British didn't have a fully focussed Plan B: "we may need to acquire one but let's hope that we don't".
19. The conversation concluded shortly afterwards. Prime Minister Blair agreed, at the Taoiseach's request, to describe the exchanges as a 20 minute discussion, rather than a phone call - for presentational purposes.

Department of the Taoiseach

Transcript of phone call between the Taoiseach and Prime Minister Blair, Friday, 11 July 1997

PM Blair: Bertie.

Taoiseach: Tony, how are you today.

PM Blair: Well I am better.

Taoiseach: Like myself.

PM Blair: Thanks very much for the helpful statement that you put out. I think that was just the right thing to say, really.

Taoiseach: Well, all week we have, I think, tried everything we can to be constructive and helpful.

PM Blair: Yes, well you have and I am most grateful for it. I mean we just had to see.....

Taoiseach: It's in all our interests.

PM Blair: There would be a bit of hassle probably from some of the Loyalists groups and Ian Paisley is out denouncing them as anaemic and all the rest of it.

Taoiseach: But it should de-escalate most of it anyway, I think.

PM Blair: And I think it's fine and the reaction that we are giving is very similar to your own. I should say also that I was just going to bring you up to date with what else we are doing. We've replied to Sinn Féin in the terms that you have seen. On decommissioning, we are making some progress with Trimble, although it's still quite difficult. The problem he has, to be fair, is that he is under intense attack for even coming this far with us, from the other extremes. But we are trying to put together something that would be a sort of scheme for talking about decommissioning so that something is at least happening if the talks get underway properly in September which will enable him, his problem is that if he can't say that it is possible that decommissioning should happen, you know, at the

very least, then he has got a difficulty. I think he is - my awareness of his position is not total at the moment since I have not spoken to him again since I saw him about 10 days ago - but I think that he is trying to come some way with us and frankly whatever other horrendous problems there were after the decision about Drumcree, it actually in a way made it easier for him to come along some way on decommissioning. So anyway we are just looking now at what things we can do to bolt that down and get that agreed.

Taoiseach: Just on that one, just the first point, the clarification thing sent to McGuinness was very positive, I think, and from our point I think it's a good example of what we can do together, so I appreciated the chance we had of trying to have an input into that because after Garvaghy and the atmosphere that was there, I think that reply would help and Mitchell McLaughlin more or less suggested that today. I suppose the way we look at it, Tony, is that after Garvaghy, the chance for Mo, we have kept in touch with her all week and Ray Burke has kept in touch with her trying to build up that confidence again and build up the Nationalist confidence and what has happened by the Orange people yesterday will certainly help, but I think in the talks process, that's the area I think we can try to build up the confidence and I met the SDLP yesterday and when I met the community people here in a week, that is the point that I have been saying, that we have to move on into the process. The only thing, I know that for David Trimble it's a narrow line for him, but I think it still remains essential that we hold fast to the timetable, because if we can stick to that and stick to the joint paper on decommissioning, then it doesn't unravel. And the only point ...

PM Blair: Timetable for September starting, you mean.

Taoiseach: Yes, for September.

PM Blair: Oh yes, we will hold for that certainly.

Taoiseach: It's a very tight timetable now to get the decisions in July. The only thing that - I think that (decisions in July ?) will hopefully happen from what the others are telling me - I suppose the only thing that we felt that the response to your draft to David Trimble,

I understand what you are doing to try to appease him, but the only thing that I just warn on that, it could run the risk of upsetting the balance achieved in the joint paper and it could also expose the Governments to the accusation of offering different interpretations to Sinn Féin on one side and to the Unionist party on the other and, you know, if we get into - that it's difficult as it is - it would be very hard to get back out of it and I suppose I just think it's very vital that we stick to the points you know which we didn't all agree with - there were many points that you put to us that we didn't agree with in the overall paper - but at least, what that is saying is that the prescription laid down in the International Body, that we stick to that and I think if we signal, either of us, a willingness to part from the proposals in the International Body by saying that maybe decommissioning could be set up without the involvement of parties or that decommissioning could take place before there has been at least some political progress in substantive negotiations, (we) could blow that position off course. Now that was just our thinking here.

PM Blair: Yes, I mean I understand that obviously we mustn't say different things to the different sides. I have not actually seen our draft reply to Trimble yet but I think we are talking to your officials about it. But what is, I mean the hard thing which we touched upon is that, the hard issue is this, is the effect of what we have agreed to say there must be decommissioning during negotiations or is the effect of it to say there must be a rational possibility of decommissioning during the course of negotiations? That, to be blunt about it, that is the point of interpretation, that is difficult.

Taoiseach: Sure, sure.

PM Blair: What we, I think both believe, is that actually when you get into a process of negotiations and the thing is proceeding then in fact decommissioning will cease to be such a great problem.

Taoiseach: That there is no guns being used, it is not as big an issue.(?)

PM Blair: Sure and also for Sinn Féin at some point things are really progressing, it's not a great deal of hassle for them to make at least a gesture in that direction.

Taoiseach : Yes

PM Blair : The problem is from the other side. What we are being met with is their concern that in effect you give Sinn Féin as it were a veto on decommissioning during the course of the negotiations so that they are then subject to the attack that in fact what they are agreeing to is something that means that there will definitely be no decommissioning during the negotiations. Now that is not obviously what we are agreeing either.

Taoiseach : Right.

PM Blair: So you are in this territory where ultimately what this will come down to is that there must be some possibility, even likelihood, that decommissioning will happen during the negotiations without forcing either Sinn Féin to the position where you say, right if there isn't decommissioning upfront then you don't come into the talks, which is one blockage. Or the other blockage, which is in effect to say to the Unionists, well I am afraid it is only if Sinn Féin want to that any decommissioning happens at all.

Taoiseach: Well that's keeping to the voluntary nature of it. I mean the two important points in the International Body, one if somebody signs up to it they are signing up to non-violence and that's the whole principle of it. The second thing is, though it's not in the main point, it's in the text of it, that people, you know, what Mitchell is saying that during the talks that people certainly should consider decommissioning. Now I think what we will be pushing is that the voluntary nature of that is what would hopefully happen during talks. If we say that it's a compulsory feature then, we are back in to the whole thing that's kind of

PM Blair: I understand that. My own view reading Mitchell is that he is clearly contemplating that there should be decommissioning during the negotiations rather than before or after. But I am aware that we are in this area where if there is too pointed a definition.....

Taoiseach: We are all in trouble.

PM Blair: We are all in trouble but.....

Taoiseach: This is your worry, I gather your officials and I think our people share it (regarding) the suggestion that the Governments give their clarifications to David Trimble in writing, I think they believe that this could be interpreted then as a second joint paper. I think our people are just agreeing with the view of your people as well but you still have a letter that you have to answer which is your problem.

PM Blair: But I mean the point to be aware of so as not, there should not be any misunderstanding between us. I am in the position where if I read the words of Mitchell which said during the negotiations and OK you can place a lot of emphasis on the word considering but I mean I would say and indeed I think he would say that certainly the intention is, the intention at the very least is, that there should be decommissioning during the negotiations. I would lose the Unionists altogether if I were to say that at least the intention was not that there should be decommissioning during the negotiations but all the mechanisms of that and all the rest of it is something to be discussed. Now I have got to try and do that in a way that is sensitive to losing the other side out of this.

Taoiseach: Who, if they don't believe that it is a totally voluntary aspect, would say no.

PM Blair: Or who believe if they simply think that what they are getting is a blockage by a different means, then that's obviously deeply unhelpful. But as ever what we are trying to do here

Taoiseach: Is to balance.

PM Blair: Is to make sure that you don't lose off either end. I mean it like walking a tightrope, hanging on with both arms to two different parties. I mean if you let go either one of them, then the whole thing is unbalanced.

Taoiseach: I'm hoping that over the next few weeks - I know you said to me on Sunday morning that it wasn't the reason - but I think David Trimble in fairness to him he certainly owes you one whatever about owing us anything but he certainly owes you one.

PM Blair: That is true and don't worry as ever with these things we call it in. My judgement about this and I could be completely wrong and no doubt will be proved so but my judgement is that if there was a ceasefire soon before any other killing took place then I think that this issue would recede greatly. Now I may be completely wrong about that but that is my judgement.

Taoiseach: Well I honestly believe if we can get safely over this weekend and get our clarifications right and our understandings right, we have a great chance, Tony, of moving this on. That is why I would hate almost the side issue of decommissioning people to knock us off. I understand the sensitivities of it but the bigger question is to try and get the ceasefire on one side and get the joint paper on decommissioning through before the end of July so that you can move to the Three Strands for the 15 September. That Aide Memoire and that position that you have set, marches aside, gives a great focus on it and I think that's the one I will be pushing as soon as we get over tomorrow, I am just going to keep pushing like hell on that because if one could get that, now when the timing of a ceasefire, if we can get to that position, I don't know but clearly it's getting very straight in that it fits into a certain equation if we can achieve it

PM Blair: Yes, that's right and I think you see so far as, what this Orange Order decision has done is that it's sort of altered the context and perception here, people suddenly, last week they were thinking all the whole thing is bloody hopeless, why is he spending all this time on it, it's a waste of time, go and look after the health service type of stuff, which is a real problem we have, in terms of what people think here. Certainly people think well maybe there is some hope there. I think that if before the end of July, let us say, Sinn Féin were able to call a ceasefire, then I think that it would alter the whole thing, there would be a sense of hope again.

Taoiseach: Well that's exactly it. So if we can get these clarifications right I think and if the timetable in the talks is stuck to and I think it will be because everyone is clear on what they want to achieve on it, then we can make some real progress and that's what we have to do. We will be working away on the other side trying to ensure that as best we can.

PM Blair: Right. I will be, let me assure you, this is what I want to do, I will be as sensitive as I can on decommissioning, just as long as you know the dimension on the other side that I have to keep.....as I will be left with the opposite (problem).

Taoiseach: I understand that. But I just think that if we get into a position that there is two positions.....

PM Blair : OK, I understand that very well, I agree with that.

Taoiseach: It could really get confused because we would be accused of trying to mislead, either one of us and that would be a recipe for disaster. But hopefully tomorrow will go well.

PM Blair: I think the easiest, just thinking about this for a minute, Bertie, the easiest way for this to be resolved is a way that doesn't - frankly the less definition that we have to give the better - the easiest way for this to be resolved in my view is as it were for you to say that of course people want decommissioning during the course of the negotiations which stops short of you having to say look there's an obligation, there is a blockage if there isn't and for me to say well of course, the intention of Mitchell is that there should be decommissioning during the negotiations which takes me one millimetre but an important millimetre away from saying this is something that's got to happen during the course of negotiations.

Taoiseach : Yes

PM Blair : In other words that I say the contemplation of Mitchell is clear that there should be decommissioning during negotiations but obviously we've got discuss how this happens and all the rest of it. That gives me just that little bit of freedom there. What we have got to avoid is a situation where I either am saying a line that effectively the Unionists can veto this if there isn't the decommissioning which they want or you are saying that there is no way that Sinn Féin can do anything other than if they decide they want to. See what I mean.

Taoiseach: I do. I will be all the time urging that decommissioning is an important aspect and if talks are going well and what I have said numerous times is that the voluntary aspect of this should happen

and then I refer to Mitchell without spelling too clearly out what Mitchell, I mean he was trying to balance himself.

PM Blair: Of course, and he has passed on an ambiguity to us. The word voluntary, I think, I know what you are saying and of course that is important but the more that you could use language like well if there is political progress I very much.....

Taoiseach: Hope that there is. I'll be careful on it, I am not going to start saying, no, never, it can't happen but at the same time I know I have to be honest, I know if I say there must be,

PM Blair : Yes

Taoiseach : then they are gone and that's the difficulty.

PM Blair: We have got to try and avoid that, what is an ambiguity being defined in such a way as that it splits apart the movement to get them all in.

Taoiseach: I think the joint paper in so far as it, it's done a good job, certainly gives that movement. It's a question, does David Trimble need more clarification in the letter back or with Sinn Féin coming back looking for another line of clarification, I just hope that doesn't happen.

PM Blair: Let's leave it like this, that we will certainly be in touch about what we are doing and it may be that we do it through a meeting with David Trimble rather than a letter but we will just see. But whatever we are going to say we will check it carefully with you.

Taoiseach: O.K. I suppose Tony, the plan B situation where Trimble doesn't vote on the 23rd, I suppose we needn't worry about that at this stage, hopefully he will but I suppose it is something that we have to consider.

PM Blair : I'm not sure.

Taoiseach : It's too early to be worrying about it.

PM Blair: I don't know that

Taoiseach: It's a long way to the 23rd.

PM Blair: ..we have a fully focused plan B. We may need to acquire one but let's hope that we don't.

Taoiseach: OK Tony.

PM Blair : O.K. Bertie

Taoiseach : ... and I hope that this weekend is quieter than last.

PM Blair: Certainly, and how is your Government going.

Taoiseach: Great, everything is settled in, we got through the first few days in the Dáil, of course as well as the North, we have a few domestic issues - they are arguing here about old enquiries that we have going on into a previous leader of my party.

PM Blair: I've read about this. Nothing got to do with you.

Taoiseach: It's not really, I have long distanced all the way along, I suspected this would come out in one form or another, I did not know exactly what would come out but I had distanced myself from it since my party conference earlier on in the year.

PM Blair: (?)I am just going to say that this is a historical matter there is the authority to determine it and hope that it does not affect your new Government.

Taoiseach: That's it, a part of history as far as I am concerned.

PM Blair: I know it's difficult. Now Bertie, I have just been passed a note by our Press Secretary who just wanted to say that this is what we will say if asked, that we had a 20 minute call together, that I thanked you for your positive reaction to the Orange Order decision, that it showed progress could be made and expressed determination to keep the peace process going forward and we were pleased to have been able to talk.

Taoiseach: That's terrific. If he actually just says in that, a twenty minute discussion, leave out the phone call, it drives some people mad here, they think you and I are doing nothing here except phoning each other up, so just put in discussion, let them work out it's on the phone.

PM Blair: I see, twenty minute discussion, how else do they think we do it, by telepathy. Let them worry about that.

Taoiseach: They keep asking here, what's this, early morning calls.

PM Blair: OK, I'm sorry about that.

Taoiseach: Not your fault, it's just the way they jump up on it.

PM Blair: Bye.

Taoiseach: Bye.