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Telephone Conversation Between Taoiseach and Prime Minister Blair

Wednesday, 20 August, 1998
Thursday

T: Hello Tony

PMB: Oh hi Bertie - How are you doing today?

PMB: Oh fine. I thought your stuff went very well yesterday.

T: Yes It mm, I think I probably, there's one area I'll probably run into a lot of problems with when its analysed is that on the Press side, it kind of went through a bit unnoticed yesterday, but.....

PMB: It went what?

T: It went through unnoticed yesterday but I think some of it will probably infringe a bit on to the Press, you know, and people who are gathering information and we'll have to deal with it, but other than that I'm just going to roll on with it anyway.

PMB: Yes, what we're saying is, we're still not totally sure, we'll need primary legislation but I think we probably will actually.

T: Well I'm going to stay out of that, Trimble was going on about that last night, but I refused to comment and whether you should or shouldn't do this or that or the other, that's not any of my business so, I'll keep away from that Tony.

PMB: I mean we will essentially do the same as you.

T: Yes, I think we should just keep operating together to try and get the Guards and the RUC, the big problem with me trying to get these two, the Guards and the RUC, to cooperate on the ground, is that there is all these old bits on trust and.....

PMB: And legacies from the past.

T: Yes anyway, we just keep doing our best on it. The problem is, I think, our surveillance now, I've brought a lot of my drug guys in and things like that in and the surveillance is so heavy on these guys, I think they can't even meet to say anything, but I have no alternative but to do that, so we'll just see how it ticks over.

PMB: Yes, I mean what's your best assessment of what's happening with them?

T: I think, on three fronts, firstly I think INLA will probably speak this weekend. Secondly,

PMB: They will probably what, call a ceasefire?

T: Yes, Secondly, I think we can break 32 County totally.

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PMB: Right

T: I think we can disintegrate it. There might remain a little kind of a political group talking about stuff, but I think the militant end of it, we can break it. Thirdly that leaves the Continuity, now I'm trying to make some overtures to them, they're not that significant, as I told you before, but I'd just be afraid that the rump might move to them. They're old men effectively, they're guys from the fifties, but the baddies might just move to them, and take them over, so we just have to be careful about what happens there, because the rump will move somewhere, but if we can just keep hunting the rump, but I think we are having major hits, if we just keep at it, I think we might be able to take two of the three out of the equation, you know, and that certainly will be a help.

PMB: It's possible that the loyalist group, the LVF will do the same this weekend.

T: Yes, well I think that would be really really helpful. Its terrible that you have to have deaths. I was talking to a person this morning, a clergyman who has been involved in this for a long time, and he said to me, you know this guy has been involved in it for maybe 15 to 20 years, and he said that the way you have to think, as terrible as the events that are gone to pass, there are people walking around today and what you have to do is try to make sure they are still walking around tomorrow. So it was kind of the first time during the week that I heard something that made some sense to me. So at least we can stop anyone else getting hurt, or at least as many as we can getting killed. I had a good meeting, I had two meetings with Sinn Féin, well one meeting, and one on the phone, and I met Trimble last night, and I haven't talked to anyone about this, but if I could just say that I have four things that I think have to fall together, Tony, the only way of getting these two guys over the hills. Both of them have fears, Trimble has fears about within his own Assembly group, not to mind his wider party, that there is still so much fear and distrust, Adams has fear that if he moves too much he'll aggravate or get his own militant guys upset, so that's his line, but between all of that if Adams can give me the words which I am going to do a new draft of, and he is going to talk to you shortly as well, I understand.

PMB: Yes I think later this afternoon.

T: Yes, well if he can get the words, even if he says, as near perfect as he can make them, OK they probably won't sell to you and I, but at least if we can get them as far as we can, and if Trimble's response is OK, and if they get to the stage of at least a meeting, I pick up strongly from the Unionists that something has to happen on the decommissioning line as well, so that they can get over the barrier of Sinn Féin getting into the Assembly. Now I said that clearly and straight in my assessment to Adams just a while ago. Now I think I've managed to get, rather than not talking about all this interlocutor or stuff, I think McGuinness is the one to handle this, because the Unionists keep on saying to you and I, that Sinn Féin and the IRA are the one organisation, well if they are, who better than Martin McGuinness to be the fella who is dealing with it.

PMB: Yes, absolutely.

T: You know and once we brought the word interlocutor, which I'm not too sure what that all means, in the sense of it, but I said to them last night, you stop talking interlocutor and I said to McGuinness the day before, if we drop the word interlocutor will you deal with de Chastelain and he said "I will". So I think if we let McGuinness work with de Chastelain and I said to Adams, listen, we need something on this, but even if we could get them all together, you see any one item, if Trimble meets Adams without something, he's in trouble, if Adams does something like decommissioning without getting something on it, he's in trouble, but if the 3 or 4 things could be done almost together, then nobody will see, that you know, they'll just see the final result, and they won't get them caught up in who said what about where, and the final result will be that they'll have met, they'll have removed the block of getting into the Assembly, that they'll have done something on decommissioning and that were moving on. If they start doing them bit by bit, you and I will be old, and we won't get this done. If they move quickly and together, and I think they can do that, Trimble said last to me, he'll do it if the thing is right, Adams said he'll do it if things are right, now of course they're always afraid of their shadows, but if we can force the few bits together I think we could make a lot of progress, and the reason we can do it, I think, Tony, is on the back of last week, and we couldn't do it if it wasn't last week which is the terrible irony of it.

PMB: Well I think that's all very interesting, very good, Bertie, yeah. So I mean your view is that we try and do all this stuff, the talking and, well actually Trimble saying that the block to them entering the executive is removed together.

T: Yes, I think they do, well maybe not overnight but they do it all fairly quickly. That you have, Adams sending the right words, that you've Trimble responding properly, that they meet, that McGuinness meets de Chastelain, that they try and square something, and you know then if they do something on the decommissioning then Trimble at a second meeting with Adams could say that well now you've done something, on decommissioning, that removes that. And if they do it quickly, then they don't get themselves open to all these guys who they are all afraid of.....

PMB: And they get apart and demand this, and demand that.....

T: Yes, because I believe both of them, both of them are under pressure, but really if they do it quickly the only things that their people can look at is the end result.

PMB: Yes, I mean Trimble was in an absolute far better mood this morning when I spoke, to him after your meeting with him yesterday.

T: Yes, well I did everything to try and assure him.

PMB: For which, thanks Bertie because it made a, he was getting, I mean now, that I can sense his moods easily, and yesterday he was getting terribly jumpy, and this morning I thought he was back hopeful again. What I keep saying to Adams and Trimble about each other, is I say to Adams, you know Trimble does want to do this, I say to Trimble Adams wants to do it, and you guys have just got to find out a way of getting

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this damn thing together. Incidentally, when I read your statement this morning, you know the one you put out yesterday, I thought the words that you used, about the no more this and that and the next thing, was actually a rather good way of putting it

T: Yes well it was Martin Mansergh who crafted that bit for me, and what we were trying to do is use it in a way that they could use it you know

PMB: Yes because presumably for them it would be easier if these were words that echo what the Irish Government.....

T: Exactly

PMB: Yes when, I had this conversation with Adams yesterday, after you and I had spoken, he was sort of saying to me, you know, I explained to him, the problem with saying we want all this to be a thing of the past. And he said to me, well I can't guarantee what's going to happen, and I said to him well, if your problem in giving these words, is a concern that you are effectively asked to give a guarantee in respect of all dissident republican groups, then I can understand that objection. That can be taken care of, by making it clear that it is so far as you are concerned. You know, what you can't do, is to be in a situation, where effectively your ie. saying to people, well if there isn't political progress in the way that I define it, then the other remains an option. And he said to me, you know pretty straight out, he said well I'm not saying it is an option. It isn't an option as far as I'm concerned. Well I said to him, that all it requires is for you to say it.

T: Yes, well I think that's correct.

PMB: That's the continual worry, and.....

T: Because Martin McGuinness said to me the other day, and I said very straight to him across the table, I said Martin some of these guys who are in the new IRA were your old buddies, and I said, you know, we have to be certain that we are moving away and we are finishing with them, and he said these guys are finished, all of this is finished, there is no more of this. He was very emphatic And I said to him I wish we were on TV, because he was absolutely emphatic.

PMB: You know and if they said that.....

T: Because they are very clear in their private conversations that this thing is finished, and I was trying to convince Trimble and Reg Empey last night, and of course they said to me, well the way of doing that is give us some decommissioning and I said it has to be done between de Chastelain and McGuinness, who is the best fella to handle the bloody thing, you know. Lets not argue whether he's in the IRA or not, but you, know the fact is he is Martin McGuinness, and if anyone can give over anything, work to give over anything, it's him.

PMB: Yeah

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T: I get that sense that it'll all have to fall fairly quickly, because otherwise the more these fellas get caught up in words, I mean you and I would have a 100 things done while they're still wondering about the words on the first thing.

PMB: Yes, that's right, well I'm going back there on Tuesday I'm wondering whether you and I should try and meet again as well. I could always come down this time if its.....

T: We can see, I'm going to try and go over to the West for a few days next week but that won't stop us arranging to meet somewhere.

PMB: You probably need a bit of a holiday

T: Well, I just want to get a few days, but I am going to be just in the West of Ireland Tony, so we could arrange to.....

PMB: I could always come down and see you.

T: That would be perfect, we could meet somewhere in the West, we could meet in a hotel in the west

PMB: Yes, OK well let me consider, now I'm going to speak to Gerry Adams now I will try and work on trying to put all this together, so that next week, I want to get everything else, know exactly where I am with Adams and McGuinness so I can really get to work on David Trimble next Tuesday

T: OK

PMB: Then let's see where we are. I will simply give a statement, and I am going to do an interview today, simply backing up what you are saying, and saying we will echo it in our own legislation

T: OK, if we have these words Tony, as I'd hoped to have, Adams I think said to me I'd either have them in a few hours, or I'd have them in an hour, but whenever we get them we'll get them straight over. Because if that formed the first part of the choreography, if we can get you know, that bit and then Trimble's response to that is important too. Because what we don't want is either of them to be mealy mouthed, they need to be saying this is the big move, and move it forward then. Anyway lets see what's in it, and I think he'll probably tell you, he didn't actually read it out to me, but he'll probably tell you about his conversation, what he is actually saying, he said he'd get on to me later on, but I presume he is going to talk to you first

PMB: OK, well let's wait and hear that, and then and we will see if we can push it on as quickly as possible, when's your parliament getting recalled?

T: It will be the week after next

PMB: What date

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T: Probably Tuesday, Wednesday 1 or 2 September

PMB: Then Clinton will come over.

T: He's over in the North on the 3rd and then he's here on the 4th

PMB: Right, so we really want everything to be tied up for him coming.

T: I think if we can get the Adams working as near to right the Trimble words of response, as near to right, and then get de Chastellain and McGuinness meeting together, just try and move it on fairly speedily, and then on the back of the terrible tragedy of last week, and on the Clinton, yourself and myself being around then, and a bit more positive. I think that's the time to try and get it done before we drift into the September,

PMB: We will lose the impact.

T: I think we have to two of them convinced of that now, the only, I thought Adams might get very upset this morning, when I said to him, the issue of decommissioning still has to be part of this, but he didn't. I said Gerry, I have to be straight, be honest to understand that I do think something on that has to happen, as part of this equation to make it all happen. And you know, the only way he can deliver that, is it all happening very quickly. The only way Trimble can deliver going into the Executive with them, is it all happening very quickly.

PMB: There are all sorts of ways you can define decommissioning, You know, I mean it does not need to be defined as one going up to a police station and handing in the weapons.

T: I think that if he agrees something with de Chastelain, I mean I get some reports that some of this stuff is such bloody dangerous stuff now that they should be glad to get rid of it.

PMB: Well that may be true too. Then you see if they can get themselves eased into the Executive and then we can give them some good easy wins in terms of money coming into areas.

T: I mean I promised him last night that if we got over this, that as far as the British-Irish Council, I would move like a rocket on that to get it set up, and he promised me on the North South bodies, that he would not mess about on that, so I think if we can just get these two guys.....

PMB: Yes sure, we could get these under way straight away, there is no big problem with that at all.

T: We could make a lot of progress fairly quickly. Just get them talking, get over the obstacle of the Executive, I think it is possible but if we just get the words right.

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PMB: All right, Bertie, lets keep in touch.

T: OK Tony, I'll be in touch, bye.

PMB: Many thanks, bye.

ENDS