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Conversation with William "Plum" Smith (PUP)

hbk
19.12.97

1. In light of media reports that the PUP intend to pull out of the multi-party negotiations in reaction to the Government's decision to grant early release to nine IRA prisoners, I rang the PUP offices in Belfast. In the absence of David Ervine, who was away giving a media interview, I spoke to William "Plum" Smith, PUP spokesman on prisoners.
2. Smith was in despondent form, claiming that by granting the early releases the Government had "pulled the rug out" from under the PUP. He said that the perception in the loyalist community was that the Irish Government were making sure that republicans got everything they asked for, while loyalists were getting nothing. He claimed that the PUP were being ignored by the Governments, both inside and outside of the process and (in what appeared to be a clear threat that the PUP might be forced to pull out of the talks) indicated that matters were now out of his hands.
3. Nevertheless, despite his trenchant criticism of the Government's decision, it quickly became clear that the true focus of loyalist anger is the British Government and the prison authorities in the North. Smith recounted to me a whole series of incidents over the last week in which loyalists felt that they had been discriminated against by comparison to republicans. (This even included the seizure of cigarettes from loyalist prisoners returning on parole). He also cited the negative impact of recent decisions to "knock back" a number of life-sentence prisoners.
4. He said that he had met Adam Ingram on Wednesday and that Ingram had told him that there would be no releases outside the process (Smith appeared to understand this as meaning the talks process, rather than the legal process). He had then heard later that night that the Government were to release nine republicans. I pointed out that Ingram did not speak for the Irish Government and that, as far as I was aware, he would not have known about the Government's intention when he spoke to Smith.
5. Smith asked why we had not mentioned the proposed releases to the PUP at the negotiations earlier in the week. I replied that the decisions were taken on a confidential basis and that people were only informed at the last minute. I was able to say truthfully that I had only learned that the releases were taking place when they were announced on the evening news.
6. I pointed out that the Irish Government had a stated policy of seeking to move on early releases in response to the ceasefires. We had made this clear at the talks in the Liaison Sub-Committee on Confidence-Building Measures. I said that we had no intention of discriminating against loyalist prisoners and that this was evident from the fact that we had released any remaining loyalist prisoners shortly after the loyalist ceasefire.

7. Smith expressed regret that the two Governments did not coordinate their positions better. I replied that we had our own policy on early releases and that we had urged the British authorities to take a similarly enlightened approach. We hoped that by pursuing our own policy, we would put pressure on them to follow suit.
8. I concluded by expressing regret that the Government's action had given rise to difficulties in the loyalist community and stressed that this was obviously not our intention. I repeated that our policy was directed towards a positive address to the situation of all those imprisoned as a result of the Northern conflict. I stressed our desire to ensure that the PUP were fully briefed on all developments which would impact on the negotiations.
9. Smith thanked me for phoning. He said that he could not pretend that the situation was anything but bad, although he expressed the hope that the British Government might be persuaded to do something in the New Year which might improve things.

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19 December 1997

cc PST, PSMS, PSS, Second Secretary
Counsellors A-I, Section, Talks Unit
Ambassadors London and Washington, Joint Secretary Belfast
Messrs Teahon, Dalton, Mansergh