



cc.

Jordan
Paul

Alastair
Campbell

Lord Haire

*with the
compliments of*

*Rt. Hon. Paddy Ashdown, M.P.
Yeovil*

HOUSE OF COMMONS
LONDON, SW1A 0AA



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LONDON SW1A 0AA

The Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
LONDON

19th May 1998
Our Ref : PM

Dear Tony,

Thanks for your call yesterday, it was most helpful.

I promised to let you know how the visit to Northern Ireland went and what my conclusions were. No doubt you will already be aware of most of these, but I will list them for you anyway.

I spent nearly all my time with the Royal Irish Regiment and the RUC, which are, in John Alderdice's opinion (correct in my view), two areas which urgently need reassurance. I strongly recommend that when you come out here for your final visit you should specifically mention some of the points in relation to the security forces listed below:-

1. We need to repeat the commitment of the Government to the strength of the Union. Naturally this has to be qualified with a statement along the lines "for as long as the Northern Irish people wish this to remain in existence". You have of course said all this before – but many Unionists are not in listening mode at the moment, so repetition of this message is necessary.
2. For the same reason it will be necessary to reaffirm what you have already said about no-one being allowed to serve on any future N.I. executive unless they have, by word and by action, committed themselves permanently to peaceful and democratic means. I heard Jeffrey Donaldson use some useful phrases on the lunchtime news today along the lines "anyone who retains a private army, or is not prepared to give up their weapons, could not be allowed to serve in any further Northern Ireland government." From what I heard he said nothing that you could not, with considerable effect, repeat or refer to. You may wish to get someone to print the text out for you.
3. There is real concern amongst the RUC and the RIR about their future job security. There has been much propaganda from the 'No' campaign that they will "get their cards" if the 'Yes' vote goes through straight after the referendum. The uncertainty this has caused is making the very difficult job of policing in the present conditions

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even more difficult. There is real apprehension in both units about the implications which would follow a 'Yes' vote, both personally and in terms of policing during the marching season ("we have a very testing time ahead and confusion about our personal future, is not helping us to face this" is how a senior officer put it to me). It would be immensely helpful if you were able to say that you would see no reduction in the strength of either units until peace was firmly and irreversibly established and this would not happen, in your view, for a considerable length of time (if you could mention a figure for the number of years that would be helpful). It is vital, however, that both the RIR and the RUC receive firm assurances that if, in due course, there is a reduction of force levels, then they will be dealt with through a special package of measures which recognises their contribution over the last 25 years and which reflects both honour and generosity on the part of the Government.

4. There is widespread concern about the possibility that those who, after the referendum, commit criminal acts, (e.g. say the murder of a policeman) could then have access to the "immunity" packages contained in the Good Friday agreement, by simply associating themselves with one of the organisations that had committed itself to peace. Most useful of all would be for you to make clear that the provision for prisoners release would only apply to acts committed before the referendum and anyone who committed criminal acts of this sort after the date of the referendum and would face the full rigour of the Law.
5. It would be advisable to stress that the international commission for de-commissioning arms will be quickly established and will require effective action from all parties who seek to participate in the Assembly in the very near future.
6. There is a strong feeling that the Government should make it clear that Sinn Fein and the IRA will be judged as a single organisation and that Sinn Fein will be held accountable for the actions of the IRA.
7. It would also be helpful to make clear that the Government would indicate their intention to take very robust action indeed against any minority group who sought to undermine, through criminal acts, the will of the Northern Irish people, after it has been expressed in a referendum and that this would be done on a cross border North/South basis. I hinted at interment in this context as "something to be considered".

I hope this is helpful.

Yours sincerely,

Rt. Hon Paddy Ashdown MP



PRESS RELEASE

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ASHDOWN TO BRING IMPORTANT MESSAGES BACK TO LONDON AFTER 'YES' CAMPAIGN VISIT

After a series of meetings with the Northern Ireland Security Forces during a one day visit in support of the 'Yes' campaign, Liberal Democrat Leader Paddy Ashdown MP said today:

"The RUC and the Royal Irish Regiment, both forces highly valued in the community, are still manning the front line between peace and violence. I have listened carefully to their hopes for peace and to their remaining concerns about the Good Friday Agreement. They have given me some important messages to take back to London.

"I have asked them to grasp our best chance for building peace by voting 'yes' on Friday. The choice between 'yes' and 'no' is a choice between hope and despair. The 'No' campaign offers nothing more than a return to the past. There is tremendous good will for Northern Ireland and its future. A 'no' vote risks Northern Ireland's friends turning their backs in despair.

"The television images of the Balcombe Street Gang and of Michael Stone being paraded before their supporters were truly sickening, and they have planted doubts in the minds of some people here, but I ask them to focus on the long term goal of building a lasting peace in the Province, rather than on the deeply regrettable but momentary pictures we saw on our screens last week."

ends

VISIT PROGRAMME FOR RT HON PADDY ASHDOWN MP: 19 MAY 1998

SERIAL	TIMINGS	EVENT	COMMENTS
01	0730	ETD Heathrow Terminal 1	British Midland Flight BD080 Accompanied by: Lord Alderdice
02	0845	ETA Belfast International Airport	Met by: Cllr David Ford, General Secretary
03	0915 - 0945	Visit Lagan College Sixth-formers (integrated school)	Met by: Cllr Steve McBride Principal: Mrs Helen McHugh
04	1000 - 1030	Visit HQ RUC	Met by: Ronnie Flannigan, Chief Constable
05	1120	Arrive Bn HQ 6 Royal Irish	Drummad Barracks, Armagh
06	1125 - 1135	Briefing by CO	Lt Col Farren Drury MBE
07	1135 - 1155	Presentation by soldiers	Section Commander, Chef, Full-time/Part-time soldiers
08	1155 - 1250	Visit all-ranks club	Cross-section of 40 members of Battalion
09	1250	Depart	
06	1300	Arrive RUC Newry	Met by: Supt Alan Caldwell, Sub-Divisional Commander
07	1305 - 1320	Briefing	SDC and Chief Inspector Graham (Deputy SDC)
08	1320 - 1400	Lunch with RUC officers	Cross-section of 10 police officers
09	1400 - 1410	Tour of station	
10	1410	Depart	
11	1500	Arrive Belfast Harbour Airport	
12	1540	ETD Belfast Harbour Airport	Jersey European Flight JY973
13	1700	ETA London Gatwick - South Terminal	

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DAILY MIRROR (NI edition)

Why I support a Yes vote in Northern Ireland this Friday

A personal appeal by Paddy Ashdown

500-600 words

The streets of Belfast today are a world away from those I knew in the 1970s. Then, as a Royal Marines Commando Company commander, I and my fellow soldiers patrolled a city torn apart. I vividly remember the night when the first nail bomb used in Northern Ireland blew the foot off one of my fellow Marines in the Crumlin Road. I remember too, the burning houses and the terror on the faces of innocent women and children, both Catholic and Protestant, driven out of their homes by the mob.

Then, there was despair. Now, there is a new mood of hope, and a new reality: a real chance of peace in Northern Ireland - the best chance for a generation. It may be the last chance for some time.

I hope that during my visit today, meeting members of the RUC and the Royal Irish Regiment, we will be able to talk about some of the issues which are making the Unionist community, or parts of it, hesitant about taking this chance. I was brought up a Northern Irishman and am proud of it. And my family was a divided one, with my mother a Protestant and my father a Roman Catholic. I desperately want my fellow countrymen and countrywomen to grasp this chance of peace with both hands. And I will be listening and advising those I meet not to turn their back on what has been achieved so far - not to turn their back on the opportunities for investment and prosperity which will come with peace and stability. The people of Britain value Northern Ireland, and they want it as part of the Union. But their patience is not inexhaustible.

This opportunity has taken a long long time to build, with, at long last, proper consultation with all parts of the community, and a slow but steady building of the foundations for peace. The people of Northern Ireland OWN this peace process. It belongs to them, not to their politicians, or to the prisoners on day release who we have seen in recent days paraded before us in a sickening reminder of past crimes.

There are two great hurdles for the people and politicians of Northern Ireland to get over in the next few months. The first is delivering a resounding Yes vote in Friday's referendum. The second is accepting the democratic will of the people and making the planned assembly WORK. This means politicians of all persuasions and all parties working together in good faith and good heart. I hope that on Friday we will take that first crucial step, and finally make the break with the past.

ENDS