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From: JOHN HOLMES

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PRIME MINISTER

NORTHERN IRELAND

Paddy Mayhew will be reporting to Cabinet on the talks in Belfast, but you may like an update as of this evening. Michael Ancram told me that it had been another day of very hard negotiation. The plenary met only briefly under Mitchell with most of the activity taking place in bilaterals.

Reasonable progress has been made on the procedural guidelines for the opening plenary. There are still problems on the plenary agenda, but Michael thinks they should be soluble, not least since the Irish have now agreed to move decommissioning up the order and to remove from Mitchell the onus of deciding whether all participants are ready to implement the Mitchell compromise.

The new problem, which Bruton mentioned to you on the telephone, is that the Unionists have sought to reopen the Ground Rules. You will recall that these were published some time ago, and are the reference document for the Parliamentary bill on the elections. They cannot therefore be simply amended.

We, the Irish and UUP are looking for ways round this, and there are possible compromises available. But the problems looked unlikely to be finally resolved this evening.

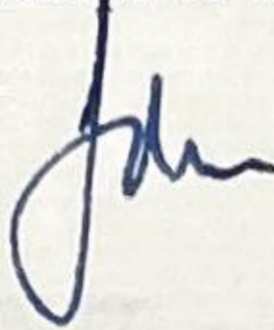
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The likelihood is therefore that the plenary will be adjourned again until Monday, with an attempt to sort out the problems in the corridors before then.

JOHN HOLMES



NORTHERN IRELAND: AFTER MARCH 1968

It will clearly take more time to establish the importance of the Manchester bomb, and what analysis and conclusions can be drawn from the movement preceded it. But it may be argued that the bomb was a significant initial view, on the most likely assumption that the IRA were not a one-off preceding a new ceasefire.

In general, we believe that we should not be taken off guard by the bomb, or further violence, if it occurs. It is important that we remain absolutely right to insist on a ceasefire and that the IRA should not be able to proceed without them. Clearly they would not be able to proceed without the talks simply on the strength of a one-off bomb. A working period of a few weeks would presumably be a reasonable requirement, and the IRA would also have to demonstrate commitment to the process and to the peace process. We should avoid setting any preconditions, such as insisting that the IRA use the word 'ceasefire', but we should insist on Sinn Féin to convince us, the Irish and the international parties, that they have earned the right to be at the talks. The process itself, the talks, are the key to all this.

Meanwhile we must press along with the process of a political settlement and have no truck with suggestions that we are premature without Sinn Féin. The importance of demonstrating the IRA's commitment to the process of getting beyond the current situation is the substance of a settlement which can satisfy both Nationalists, as well as Unionists, opinion.

On the security side, obviously we need to do everything possible to ensure that responsibility for the Manchester bomb, and any others that we hear of, is laid on the IRA. We need to ensure that we have the best available intelligence in Northern Ireland, and that we are taking a further look at some of the means for disruption of the IRA which emerged in

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