

Dear John,

I have been reflecting carefully on the position we have reached following our various discussions

Since the summer, when I first discussed this matter with you, I have had two concerns. First the IRA's actions on the ground, and what we know of their future plans, are incompatible with what you have told me is Mr Adams' readiness to guarantee a permanent cease-fire immediately following a Government statement which, as I have said throughout, can only repeat existing policy positions.

But, secondly, I am determined that the peace process should continue because that is what the people of Northern Ireland want and deserve. We have, therefore, kept open the door for Sinn Fein to join the negotiations if there is a genuinely unequivocal restoration of the IRA cease-fire.

But as you have said yourself, each atrocity the IRA commits means the credibility gap to be bridged is that much wider.

As I have repeatedly made clear I cannot, and will not, negotiate Government policy in exchange for a cease-fire. All along I have said that I will stick strictly to what is existing Government policy as set out on the public record. The text you gave me on 10 October departs from existing Government policy in places, so I cannot accept it as it stands.

When we last spoke we agreed that any cease-fire declaration needed to offer a more credible guarantee than the last one. I suggested, off the cuff, some language that might be helpful. You agreed to explore with Sinn Fein the terms of an IRA cease-fire declaration....the Irish Government have done so also. I am very grateful for your determined efforts but, as I understand it, Sinn Fein have failed to respond with clear language which meets our concerns.

Let there be no doubt, I want to progress and not stalemate, if that is achievable.

So, since Sinn Fein failed to respond to your efforts, we have now reached the point where it is right for me to set out our firm position so that Sinn Fein are in no doubt of it and can respond accordingly. The attached text does this.

I believe it is a reasonable and fair position consistent with our existing policy and with our obligations under the law. It does what you originally told us would deliver an IRA cease-fire...a cease-fire which would be for good this time.

It sets out key reassurances on the basis of our existing policy which is a matter of public record. It sets out a process of entry to the negotiations which seeks to take account of the political realities on all sides. I know you understand these realities created by the IRA's own actions. It is neither credible nor deliverable to ignore them.

What this text cannot, of course, do because Sinn Fein have refused to tell us, is take account of what Sinn Fein will say if they declare a cease-fire and how that will be reflected on the ground. If there is a new cease-fire, our reaction to it will depend crucially on both of these things.

We now need, urgently, to establish whether a genuine and dependable cease-fire will be delivered if the British Government sets out its existing policy position on the negotiations and how Sinn Fein may join them in the terms attached. It should lead straightaway to an unequivocal restoration of the IRA cease-fire which should never have been abandoned. That would greatly enhance the prospects for lasting peace and an overall political settlement.

But if the IRA chooses not to take this route to inclusive negotiations it should be under no illusion. The IRA will not bomb Sinn Fein to the negotiating table now or in the future. Further violence will simply expose Sinn Fein words about peace as a cynical ploy which commands no credibility. The Talks will go forward without Sinn Fein.

If Mr Adams is serious, then the clear position set out in the attached text offers the basis on which Sinn Fein can set out the terms of an IRA cease-fire, in which case I hope we can quickly bring this to the conclusion we all desire. Christmas then offers a natural break over which all can reflect on the new situation. But if not, then to end the current uncertainty and speculation, I believe I must set out our position in public before the end of the month.

I have written to the Taoiseach in similar terms.

Yours sincerely,