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File F/Hume.mem

bcc JEH

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JH

SUBJECT
MASTER

10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA

Filed on:

From the Private Secretary

2 July 1996

Dear Martin,

MEETING WITH JOHN HUME

The Prime Minister met John Hume for about 20 minutes in the House of Commons this afternoon. Hume was alone.

Hume said that he had had a long meeting with Adams last week. Adams had said that he had gone to the IRA and asked them to stop the violence. The IRA had said that one of the reasons why they had restarted the violence was distrust of the British Government. They believed that the eighteen months of the ceasefire had been wasted. If they could be reassured that the negotiations would be serious, comprehensive and inclusive, and that decommissioning would not be a pre-condition, the violence could be stopped. Hume commented that these were things the British Government had already said, so that they should not pose a problem. Sinn Fein were also interested in confidence-building measures (Hume did not elaborate).

... Hume gave the Prime Minister the attached letter from Adams. He went on that if the Prime Minister was ready to say these things clearly, and Adams knew about this in advance, Adams had assured him that it would be followed by the announcement of an unequivocal ceasefire. The background was that, whenever the IRA had stopped violence in the past, it had led to a split. Adams and his colleagues in Sinn Fein wanted the violence to stop without a split. Adams had made clear that he wanted to stop the violence for good and take the gun out of Irish politics. That was why he had approached Hume as he had.

The Prime Minister said that there was a problem of timing. If he were to make some kind of statement, and a ceasefire followed, it was too soon after the Manchester bomb and the discovery of the bomb factory in the Republic for Sinn Fein to be able to enter the talks. Even the Irish Government would not be able to wear this.

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

- 2 -

... Hume drew the Prime Minister's attention to the attached piece in the *Irish News*, which made the position clear publicly. He added that his approach to the Prime Minister was entirely private. He suggested that, if the Prime Minister was ready to speak as suggested, he could do so in the course of normal events. As long as Adams was alerted in advance, the context would not matter.

The Prime Minister said that he was being asked to take a large risk. The thrust of public and Parliamentary opinion since Manchester had been that it was now impossible for Sinn Fein to be trusted any more, and they had excluded themselves from the talks for good. Why was Adams confident he could achieve a new ceasefire now, when he had obviously failed a month ago? Hume said that Adams had wanted a ceasefire from the beginning. His hand had been strengthened by the grass roots reaction in Northern Ireland to the return to violence. The eighteen months of peace had changed the mood completely, particularly among young people. A lot of those who had voted for Sinn Fein had done so to strengthen the hand of those pleading for peace.

The Prime Minister said that he had been very frustrated by the return to violence, when we had been so close to getting Sinn Fein into the negotiating process, which would have enabled him to have direct contact with Gerry Adams. How would Sinn Fein make clear that any new ceasefire would be genuinely unequivocal? How could we be sure that the IRA would not once again return to violence if political developments did not go their way?

Hume said that, in Adams' view, once the IRA had taken a decision to stop the violence again, they could not go back afterwards. On the first point, Adams had said that he would use the Prime Minister's own language, ie he would refer to a new ceasefire being unequivocal. Hume repeated that whatever the Prime Minister said could be part of a speech on some other issue, as long as Sinn Fein were alerted in advance. He was sure that Sinn Fein would then respond as he had said.

The Prime Minister said that he would need to consider what Hume had said and Adams' letter, consult about this, and contemplate what the next steps could be. Hume said that he understood this. He was not asking for an instant answer. But if this Sinn Fein approach was ignored, it would obviously play into the hands of the IRA hard-liners. They would have a pretext for renewed violence. This could bring in the Loyalists, and the cycle could start again, only much worse. Hume added that he was concerned about time slipping past, not least because of the British election. He was convinced that only the Conservative Party could solve Northern Ireland.

The Prime Minister said that he would try to give Hume a response in a few days.

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

- 3 -

As he left, Hume emphasised again that he had told no one except NIO Ministers of this initiative and his meeting with the Prime Minister. He had not, for example, informed Dublin.

Comment

The meeting took place in a good atmosphere, with no recriminations on either side. Hume clearly believes that there is a real opportunity here. The Prime Minister was interested by the tone of the Adams' letter. He also notes that it is not as specific as Hume was in asking for assurances and, in particular, does not mention confidence-building measures. It does, however, propose direct dialogue between the British Government and Sinn Fein, although it is not clear whether this is a pre-condition of a new ceasefire.

The Prime Minister would be grateful for Sir Patrick Mayhew's initial comments and advice, which they may be able to discuss if we can arrange a short meeting in the next day or two. **It would be helpful if this could reach us by 1800 on 3 July.**

Despite John Hume's claim that all this was entirely private, I received a telephone call from Jonathan Powell, from Tony Blair's office, shortly after the meeting, to say that he had heard from Mo Mowlam that a new initiative from Adams for a ceasefire, using Hume as an intermediary, was in the air! I gave him the bare facts of the situation, and asked him to keep it entirely quiet. He promised to do so, and said that he would speak to Mo Mowlam accordingly. Despite his assurances, I fear all this will be more or less public very soon.

I am copying this letter and enclosures to Jan Polley (Cabinet Office).

Turner
John
JOHN HOLMES

Martin Howard Esq
Northern Ireland Office

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