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From: John Holmes
Date: 19 July 1996

PRIME MINISTER

File 124/7 -

NORTHERN IRELAND: HUME/ADAMS INITIATIVE

- ... 1. We need to think through our further response to Hume. As background, I attach the record of your original meeting with him, and your subsequent letter.
2. Hume rang me on Wednesday evening, after your meeting with the SDLP. He said that he had seen Adams the previous day again. Adams had re-confirmed that if we made a statement on the lines proposed (negotiations serious; decommissioning in parallel, not as a precondition; and readiness to consider other confidence-building measures - mostly code for prisoners), there would be an immediate ceasefire. I expressed scepticism. The IRA were actively engaged in terrorist activity, and there was no sign of any let-up. Other signals did not point to any readiness for a ceasefire. And Adams himself seemed more interested in a meeting with the British Government.
3. Hume did not answer these questions, but simply repeated that Adams was serious, and had also promised that Sinn Fein would accept totally the Mitchell principles if they joined the talks.
4. Hume has rung again since to press again for an answer, and said that he had reconfirmed the position again with Adams. The only new element was a suggestion that we should pre-clear any statement with him (effectively with Adams too).
5. As you know, the Irish and Americans are both aware of this initiative. They have not so far pressed us to do anything in particular. But there have been suggestions from both that it would obviously do no harm if we responded as positively as we

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could. The Irish believe, from their own contacts with Adams, that there is no prospect of an immediate ceasefire, that Adams' immediate objective is a meeting with us at official level, but that there is still just a possibility of a ceasefire, perhaps in late August (second anniversary of the first ceasefire is on 24 August).

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FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

Whatever the truth, we have to steer a careful course between appearing to spurn a serious approach, and being seen to be conned.

ACT 2000

I see the following broad options:

- (i) Prevaricate further: keep Hume at arm's length, saying for example that he has not provided answers to the other questions in our letter, that the circumstances are not right for any move just now post-Drumcree, that we still have to be convinced that a ceasefire is a realistic possibility etc.

Pros: avoids us getting into a messy negotiation with Hume and, at second hand, Adams.

Cons: will appear evasive to Hume, Irish and Americans; passes up an opportunity to make a gesture to wounded Nationalist opinion; and may just be ignoring a real opportunity, if not an immediate one, of a new ceasefire.

- (ii) Go back to Hume with a form of words: we could quickly work up a text for use, for example, in an interview. This could be given to Hume, on a take it or leave it basis; or without any indication of whether we are prepared to amend it; or with an explicit signal of readiness to discuss the exact form of words.

Pros: we lose nothing (we have said all this before). Shows readiness to take Hume (and Adams) seriously and looks constructive. Would genuinely put the ball back in their court, especially if you went ahead

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and used the words and there was no response. Would help keep us on the moral high ground with the Irish and US Governments.

Cons: would almost inevitably drag us into a negotiation with Hume and, indirectly, with Adams. Most unlikely that any statement would result in a ceasefire. Hume's account of Adams' requirements is almost certainly misleading, and Adams is almost certain to use any discussion to insist on a face-to-face meeting. Our motives for an oddly-worded interview would be pretty transparent. Could easily appear naïve, as dancing to Adams' tune.

- (iii) Agree to an official-level meeting with Sinn Fein (presumably Adams): there is no announced ban on such a meeting. We could tell Sinn Fein, through Hume, that we are prepared to have a meeting if they can assure us in advance that what Hume has told us is true. Extra cover could be provided by saying that we believed it was important to be in contact with Sinn Fein to ensure the Apprentice Boys' March passed off peacefully. Whoever met Sinn Fein would have to have a pretty tough brief, essentially saying that the only thing we wanted to hear from Sinn Fein was readiness to declare a ceasefire. We would also have to make clear that any further bomb would immediately abort such a meeting or, if the meeting had already happened, mean no further meetings were possible.

Pros: would be a coup de theatre, and appear dynamic/active. Would help to repair relations with the Nationalists, and please the Irish and the Americans. Could contribute to a ceasefire (though not immediately).

Would get us out of operating through the highly unreliable medium of Hume. If used right, could get the ball firmly in the Sinn Fein court.

Cons: hard to stomach, and extremely difficult to present in domestic political terms. Would draw us into negotiating with Sinn Fein, and could appear to undermine the Belfast talks (but it could happen after they adjourn for the summer).

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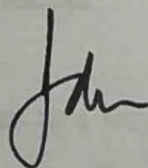
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None of these options is very attractive. (i) is the easiest, but the situation is very fragile and calls for more than just sitting pat. (ii) is also a holding position, but appears more constructive. Actually making a statement obviously designed to attract Sinn Fein into the game would not be easy to stage-manage without appearing too obvious - but it would not be impossible to weave the words into a longer interview. There is also a time factor - it would probably have to be done before your holiday. (iii) is obviously politically unattractive in terms of Unionist and some backbench reaction. But it should not be dismissed out of hand. A dramatic move at this point has a lot going for it (particularly after Parliament has got up), given the way the political landscape in Northern Ireland has shifted following Drumcree.

The option favoured by NIO officials is a combination of (ii) and (iii), ie to give a further paper to Hume (or directly to Sinn Fein), setting out clearly what he has told us and asking for confirmation that this is the position; saying that we could say what is proposed but only if the position is as Hume has described it; and holding out the possibility of an official-level meeting with Sinn Fein to clarify the position if the position is indeed as set out by Hume.

You may like to reflect on all this over the weekend, and discuss on Monday morning.



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