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**NI(96) 8** appear to be three key issues for Sinn Féin:

**17 September 1996**

**Copy No:**

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decommissioning;

**CABINET**

**MINISTERIAL COMMITTEE ON NORTHERN IRELAND  
PROSPECTS FOR RESTORATION OF THE IRA CEASEFIRE**

**Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland**

1. John Hume has been claiming to the Prime Minister, on the basis of conversations with Adams, that the IRA will restore their ceasefire if they receive certain reassurances from HMG in advance. His most recent approach coincides with other suggestions that a renewed IRA ceasefire may be possible. This paper sets out the background and makes recommendations on how we should respond.

**Other recent developments**

**Hume's approach**

2. Hume made a series of approaches in July, suggesting that the reassurances sought were all matters which the Government had already said in public. The Prime Minister made clear to Hume that he was sceptical that further words could make any difference but, to test Adams' sincerity, set out in a text for Hume the Government's position on the key points (Annex A).

3. Hume has shown this text and letter to Adams. He has now returned with a much longer text (Annex B), cleared by Adams and, he claims, the IRA. If we made this statement, and accompanied it with similar private assurances on the key points, Hume says the IRA would respond shortly afterwards, at a time

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specified in advance, with a renewed 'total cessation'. Hume also claims that this time the ceasefire would be for good.

4. There appear to be three key issues for Sinn Fein:
- (i) no preconditions for negotiations. This is code for concern about decommissioning;
  - (ii) a fixed timeframe for the talks, eg 6 months;
  - (iii) confidence building measures, by which is meant action on prisoners.
5. Both the Irish and US Governments know of the approach. The Americans have heard of it direct from Adams as well as Hume. They believe that Adams is serious but Adams has stopped short of confirming to them that the proposed assurances will definitely lead to an IRA ceasefire.

### Other recent developments

6. There are several significant parallel developments:
- renewed Sinn Fein confidence post-Drumcree. Despite a recent opinion poll in the Irish Times which suggests the contrary, Drumcree is generally reckoned to have boosted Sinn Fein's support among nationalists. They feel, politically, in a position of strength;
7. the loyalist ceasefire is under pressure. Despite continued punishment beatings and the death threat against two prominent paramilitaries for opposing the ceasefire, the loyalist ceasefire

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remains intact. But it is under severe pressure and would collapse if the IRA resumed violence in Northern Ireland, or continued their attacks on the mainland. The Loyalists have made clear that a genuine restoration of the IRA ceasefire is the surest way of maintaining the Loyalist ceasefire;

- an understanding is emerging among the key participants on how to address decommissioning in the negotiations. The early signs are that the UUP accept that a cut and dried resolution of decommissioning before political negotiations start is unrealistic. They seem ready to settle for discussion of the issue, assurances from both Governments on their approach (including timescale and content of the necessary legislation), and the establishment, in parallel to the launch of the three strands, of a procedural mechanism to secure some decommissioning during the course of the negotiations.

- an IRA general army convention seems imminent. The purpose of this rare event is not clear to us. It is not likely to be designed to endorse a new ceasefire. But it is likely at least to debate the key issues of peace and war. One outcome could be some structural changes within the PIRA set up but most observers expect the political leadership of Adams and McGuinness to be endorsed.

### **Chances of a restored IRA ceasefire**

7. There appears to be a desire for a further ceasefire among some of the Sinn Fein/IRA leadership, but much evidence suggests that the rank and file is more interested in war than peace. Its intensive preparations for a return to full scale violence and further mainland attacks continue, as do punishment beatings.

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The present pause in attacks since Manchester is by accident, not design. Most of the internal pressure is for a resumption of violence in Northern Ireland, not a ceasefire.

8. On this basis, the chances of a renewed ceasefire in the near future look poor. But a plausible political case can still be made for a renewed ceasefire from a Sinn Fein viewpoint:

- any strategic analysis which underpinned the August 1994 ceasefire - that violence no longer furthered their objectives, which could instead be pursued in political negotiations - remains valid;
- decommissioning was seen by the IRA as a fundamental block. If Unionists sign up to a way forward on that with which Sinn Fein and the IRA can live, that obstacle will be removed;
- Drumcree means a ceasefire could be declared from a position of political strength, rather than in response to pressure;
- if signs of growing cooperation between the SDLP and UUP come to anything, there is a risk of a deal being struck in Sinn Fein's absence;
- a ceasefire followed by Sinn Fein's rapid entry to political negotiations could be the best way to fend off internal pressure for a full resumption of violence.

9. The Irish Government believe this is a plausible scenario, on the basis of their information and contacts. As already suggested, we are a lot more

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sceptical. But even if this scenario were correct, the IRA could still be looking for a further mainland or continental "spectacular" before any ceasefire was declared. In separate conversations last weekend, Michael Ancram received clear suggestions from both Cardinal Daly and the Taoiseach that restoration of the ceasefire was a real possibility. At the same time, while the Taoiseach's information was that the pro-ceasefire faction would have the upper hand in the general army convention, he also feared that the IRA might seek to precede any restoration with a major attack.

10. At all events, issues of peace and war do seem to be under real debate now in the IRA. We do not know the outcome, nor whether it will reflect a purely tactical judgement or a strategic one defining the IRA's long-term approach. Perhaps the likeliest outcome of a General Army Convention is endorsement of a free hand for the leadership to call a ceasefire when they judge the conditions are right. But a restored ceasefire - even within a matter of a few weeks - cannot be ruled out; nor can a full scale resumption of violence. We must be ready for either but, to the limited extent possible, seek to push the IRA towards a restoration of its ceasefire.

### Response to Hume

11. The approach Hume reports may be genuine. But even if Adams is sincere, it is not clear he can deliver. We must also be alive to possible traps, such as being enticed into a protracted negotiation with Sinn Fein when they have no intention of delivering a ceasefire. On the other hand, dismissing out of hand what could be presented in public as a genuine offer of a ceasefire on reasonable terms also holds considerable dangers.

12. This points to:

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- not spurning what may be, or may be presented as, a genuine offer of a ceasefire;
- but protecting ourselves against possible tactical manoeuvres and disadvantageous leaks.

13. We should therefore respond by repeating our readiness to restate existing Government policy if that will help produce a renewed ceasefire, but making clear that we will not pay a price, in terms of changing policy, to achieve one. That points to revising Hume's obviously unacceptable draft text to remove dangerous vagueness and to bring it into line with existing policy. A possible response is at Annex C, in the form of a draft letter to Hume, warning inter alia that any further IRA attack risks reducing the credibility of any ceasefire to zero, and a revised draft text which could be used, perhaps incorporated into a larger speech or press article, if we ever get that far.

14. On the three key points raised by Sinn Fein with Hume:

- (i) No preconditions to negotiations: Decommissioning is the real issue here. Hume claims Sinn Fein can accept the parallel approach in the Mitchell report. Paragraph 5 of the revised draft makes it clear we are seeking a commitment to the Mitchell approach under which some decommissioning takes place during negotiations in the context of political progress;
- (ii) a timeframe for negotiations. An imposed timeframe is out of the question. Hume has said that in practice Sinn Fein might accept a review of the negotiations after 6 months. A similar proposal has in fact already been made in the Belfast talks. Paragraph 9 of the revised draft emphasises the Government's commitment to completing the negotiations speedily and also says that we would

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support any agreed timeframe adopted by the participants in the negotiations.

- (iii) confidence building measures (prisoners). Paragraphs 10-13 of the revised statement repeat existing policy, recall the measures we took in response to the last ceasefire but make no commitments on future policy, while calling for confidence-building measures from the IRA.

### **Direct contact with Sinn Fein**

15. We have said that Ministers will not meet Sinn Fein until the ceasefire is restored. But we have publicly kept open the possibility of officials meeting Sinn Fein before the ceasefire is restored - one such meeting was held, and acknowledged, on 26 February. The Prime Minister has told Hume that we would be prepared to consider any request for another such meeting "in the light of all the circumstances including, crucially, events on the ground". It is possible that Sinn Fein are trying precisely to draw us into such contact. But no formal request has been received so far.

### **Reaction to any new ceasefire**

16. Under the Northern Ireland (Entry to Negotiations, etc) Act 1996, I am required to issue Sinn Fein with an invitation to the negotiations "as soon as practicable" once I consider there is "an unequivocal restoration of the ceasefire of August 1994". In practice I would not be in any rush to do so. The terms of any ceasefire would need to be looked at very carefully, and the other parties consulted. An obviously tactical or conditional further cessation would not be good enough. If they did join the negotiations, Sinn Fein would of course be required to make a total and absolute commitment to the Mitchell principles and to engage in addressing the Mitchell proposals on decommissioning.

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### Unionist views

17. The possibility of a new ceasefire, and our response to it, are well understood by Unionists. The more positive stance of the UUP since negotiations resumed on 9 September can be interpreted, in part, as a desire to make as much progress as possible before Sinn Fein can get into the negotiations. However we need, at the right early time, to bring the UUP more specifically into the loop - both to prepare them against any possibility of an <sup>early</sup> IRA ceasefire, and to protect ourselves in case of any leak.

19. I will be reporting to the Committee orally on progress made in intensive discussions with the UUP this week on the way forward on decommissioning, and on the negotiations. This may give clues to their likely response to a ceasefire. Both we and the Irish Government will be showing the UUP the necessary enabling legislation each Government has prepared to make decommissioning possible. Subject to the UUP's reaction, I shall be asking for contingent approval from colleagues to publication of our Bill in draft at the appropriate moment, as a confidence-building measure for Unionists. They attach much importance to this.

### Conclusion

20. Hume's approach has to be taken seriously: even if it is not genuine, it could be publicly presented as such (as the line taken by the Cardinal indicates). We cannot afford to dismiss it out of hand, but we must continue to treat it with caution and scepticism, making clear that we cannot accept the suggested text as it stands.

21. I therefore propose that the Prime Minister responds along the lines of Annex C with a re-drafted text which simply repeats existing policy commitments, and that the Unionists be brought into this loop.

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22. Meanwhile, contingency work on how to respond to any renewed IRA ceasefire should continue. But there also remains a serious prospect of further IRA mainland attacks, and the possibility of a full scale resumption of violence in Northern Ireland. Accordingly, intensive deployment of the security forces' efforts continues to be necessary.

IRISH/ADAMS INITIATIVE: NI PAPER

NI is now fixed for 0900 on Thursday. We need to circulate a paper tomorrow morning. The NIC have sent us a draft which I think is inadequate in terms of presentation for NI - both in readability and from a tactical point of view.

I have drafted mine. I attach my version, including Annexes. I have not asked you to draft, to avoid even more paper, but obviously can if you wish. The substance is not very different but the slant is, particularly the degree of scepticism about the possibility of a new ceasefire.

As the paper suggests, discussion with the UUP on decommissioning is going quite well this week. Paddy will be ready to talk more about this at the meeting. He may also have a chance to talk to Trimble in the margins of a meeting tomorrow to warn him in very general terms about the Adams/Adams approach. His (justified) concern is to ensure that Trimble hears about this from us first, not from Crawborne. Any views on this? I think it is a good idea, if the atmosphere is right (he and Trimble are getting on very well at the moment).

I attach with my version, including the Annexes? I will ring you reasonably early tomorrow morning (after the Today programme) to check.

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