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10 DOWNING STREET
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From the Private Secretary

12 February 1997

Dear Ken,

HUME'S QUESTIONS

The Prime Minister was grateful for Sir Patrick Mayhew's paper of 11 February, and the proposed answers to Hume's questions and questions for Hume in return.

The Prime Minister very much shares Sir Patrick's scepticism about Adams' intentions and seriousness, and believes the real chances of a credible IRA ceasefire before the election are very small. He is also not convinced that Adams' statements over the weekend have succeeded in putting us on the wrong foot. Continued IRA attacks and incidents like the huge bomb in Strabane undermine his statements and expose their hypocrisy.

The Prime Minister accepts that we cannot simply leave Hume's questions unanswered and that there is advantage in clearing up genuine uncertainty about our views, if there really is any. But he is also keen to avoid getting ourselves back into the uncomfortable and unproductive situation with Hume/Adams over texts, from which we extracted ourselves with such difficulty in November. If we go back to Hume with "possible" answers to his "possible" questions, we will inevitably find ourselves back in a proxy negotiation, with Hume, the Irish and no doubt the Americans urging us to go further in our answers, and rumours about a secret deal once again growing.

Moreover the Prime Minister believes that there is a further serious danger of building up Sinn Fein's position in electoral terms by apparently running after them, exchanging texts with them and appearing to take their peaceful intentions seriously, at a time when IRA violence is constant and indeed on the increase. The SDLP particularly would not thank us for this, let alone the Unionists, whatever Hume's own role.

In the Prime Minister's view, therefore, the best course is for Michael Ancram to tell John Hume when they meet that we are still considering the

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questions he gave us but that we have some questions of our own to which we would like answers. It is after all for the IRA and Sinn Fein to convince us, after all the violence, that they are sincere, not the other way round. If Adams is prepared to answer these questions, we are prepared to answer his/Hume's. We would not hand over "possible" answers to be chewed over and amended, but tell Hume that if he comes back to a further meeting with a list of answers to our questions, we will at that stage give him a list of (definitive) answers to his questions.

As far as the content of the proposed answers is concerned, the Prime Minister has no difficulty with the bulk of these and the repetition of existing policy. However he has not had time to study them and wishes to reflect further, in particular on the answer to Question 2, and the promise to invite Sinn Fein to the talks after the elections if there is a credible ceasefire. There are obvious advantages to use of the election pause in this way, but we avoided an effective commitment of this kind in November, in order to avoid a situation where the pressure would be on us to deliver on this commitment, possibly at the expense of ignoring inconvenient facts, rather than on the IRA and Sinn Fein to give no pretext for not inviting them. A commitment of this kind would therefore be a change of approach which would need to be cleared with NI Committee. There may be drafting changes which would signal our readiness to invite Sinn Fein after the elections without such a clear commitment, e.g. changing "would be invited" to "could be invited". This will need to be examined further when we know Hume's/Adams' reaction to the questions we are putting to them. We must keep the onus on them, not allow it to be transferred to us.

I am copying this to Jane Hope (Lord Privy Seal's Office) and Jan Polley (Cabinet Office).

*Yours
John*

JOHN HOLMES

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Northern Ireland Office

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