

*See letters out.
File Jan 13/2 -
Am out at all attached to this:
it's got big down-rides +
small up-rides.
We'll discuss next week.
A.7.2.*

PRIME MINISTER

From: John Holmes
Date: 6 February 1997

cc: Alex Allan
Jonathan Haslam
Philip Barton

BLOODY SUNDAY

As you know, John Hume asked to see you, following your reply to him in the House, and to bring with him a couple of representatives from the families of those killed. He made fairly clear that this was part of a struggle between the SDLP and Sinn Fein for control of the Bloody Sunday movement. ✓

You and I both saw many difficulties in this, but I asked the NIO for advice – now attached. As you will see, Paddy Mayhew proposes that he should see Hume and the families but that you should write to Hume expressing “profound regret” for what happened. He argues that this would be very different from apologising (which would effectively accept responsibility and open the door to calls for prosecutions), and that it would be helpful both to support Hume against Sinn Fein and show sensitivity to the feelings of the families.

I have run the NIO proposal past the MOD. Although initially uncomfortable, not least since some of those involved are still serving (e.g. General Mike Walker), they have said that MOD officials and the military can live with it, since it does not seem to them to go unacceptably beyond what was said in 1992. I have asked Portillo’s private office to show it to him, which they will do overnight (they thought he would not be interested).

- 2 -

Hume is pressing me in his usual way, and claimed today that Blair or Mo Mowlam were about to say something new on the subject.

I have just read the Widgery Report. While the final conclusions say that the troops were probably fired on first, it is not difficult, at this distance, to read between the lines that the soldiers concerned panicked and shot unarmed demonstrators with little obvious justification. It was certainly an inglorious episode, which we genuinely can regret.

But the politics of saying so are not straightforward. True, it gets easier as we get further away in time from the event. And the calls in the pro-Unionist Belfast press and by Ken Maginnis for HMG to apologise make it easier still. But the distinction between regret and apologise, while real enough in some ways, may not be entirely apparent to the great British press. There is an obvious risk of headlines about U-turns, apologies and sops to Nationalists.

I see the options as follows, with Paddy Mayhew seeing John Hume in all cases:

- i. say nothing further;
- ii. ask Paddy Mayhew himself to say something to Hume on the lines proposed;
- iii. write to Hume on the lines proposed by the NIO;
- iv. write a letter which contains the word "regret", but in a less prominent way (see my draft attached).

- 3 -

I have doubts about (iii) as drafted. (ii) has risks – would Paddy get the words right or at least be understood/reported correctly? (A variant would be for him to write to Hume, e.g. after his meeting). (i) is the easy way out, especially so close to an election, but Paddy would be disappointed – he really believes what he has proposed is the right way forward. (iv) would edge us forward, but with less risk of creating a stir.

Two further considerations:

(a) the probability that we will be faced soon with more evidence about Bloody Sunday, either from the Irish or the relatives or both. If we are going to edge in their direction, it could make more sense to do it then rather than move now, and have nothing left to offer later. Or would this be seen as obviously responding to pressure/coming closer to admitting responsibility in the face of new evidence?

(b) the desirability of checking with backbench opinion before we say anything further, e.g. with Andrew Hunter.

My inclination is for me to write to the NIO to:

- ask Paddy to see John Hume and the families soon, essentially in sympathetic listening mode;

- 4 -

- say to the NIO that you are ready to move further in the direction of expressing regret, but are cautious about this and concerned about over-reactions;
- send them an alternative text on the lines of my draft, ask them to sound out discreetly backbench and other sensitive opinion, and question what would be the best timing for such a letter (whether from Paddy or you) in the light of likely "new evidence";
- copy my letter to other members of NI and give them a chance to comment.

Sorry to make a meal of this, but it is not easy.

Content?



JOHN HOLMES

Also attached are your letter to Hume
of 29 December 1992 and what you
said in the Hume a week ago.