

**SECRET***See letter out  
F4**John 17/2.**Relay: Our O'Flanagan  
Re-meet with Appleton.***From: John Holmes**  
**Date: 11 February 1997****S 17 /97****PRIME MINISTER****cc: Mr Barton****HUME/ADAMS REVISITED**

I attach a dreadful attempted bounce from the NIO, received late this evening. They had not told me that they had received new questions from Hume until earlier today, still less that they were planning to send Michael Ancram into bat with answers on Thursday.

What Paddy is proposing is that we give Hume possible answers to some possible questions, and pose some questions of our own for Hume to give Adams. Their argument is that Adams' statements over the weekend have given him the moral high ground and that we must not in any case be wrong-footed over yet another Hume/Adams exercise.

I have several comments on the general exercise:

- I am not convinced that Adams' latest comments have made much impression on anyone outside a small group in Northern Ireland. It seems to me that our political/PR position is perfectly comfortable.
- The likelihood of a new IRA ceasefire in present circumstances looks pretty close to zero.
- What the NIO are proposing sucks us straight back into the Hume/Adams quagmire from which we escaped with such difficulty in November. We will inevitably get back into negotiating on the answers, and indeed the questions, with all the usual pressure from the

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Irish and the Americans to go just a bit further to take this "historic opportunity".

- The politics of all this are awful – it will inevitably come out pretty quickly.

As against this, the best that can be said is that Sinn Fein and Hume may indeed be desperate to get some process moving, and without some initiative there is a serious risk of a degeneration into much worse violence, not least when the talks adjourn.

On the content, the suggested answers to the Hume questions are nearly all on standard lines. But I have highlighted two significant moves towards Sinn Fein: the statement that their early participation in talks is not excluded and, more seriously, a promise that, if all the conditions were met, Sinn Fein would be invited to participate from when the talks resumed. There is a case for changes along these lines – it would certainly be good to have a pre-election ceasefire and use the election gap to assess its credibility. But this is, and will be seen as, a shift in our position. The UUP would hate it.

The questions from HMG are all sensible, indeed ingenious. But again they may inevitably lead us into a kind of negotiation, especially if we present them as "possible" questions and look at Sinn Fein's "possible" answers.

In short, I don't think you will like this at all – and I think Cranborne, to whom it is copied, may have a fit.

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However, I do not think you can just say a flat no to Paddy's paper. We (I) have given the NIO a hard time recently, and in my view you must at least see Paddy and Michael to talk this through with them, perhaps with Cranborne, and explain your reservations. Ideally we would do this tomorrow. If that is not possible, we may have to ask Michael Ancram to postpone his meeting with Hume on Thursday, or at least restrict himself to a much more general line with Hume, without handing over any texts.

A possible solution may be to tell Hume that we will not answer his questions until they are definite (to avoid any negotiation), and then to respond along the lines suggested but with the kind of manuscript amendments I have made to the key answer about the timing of Sinn Fein's entry.

Perhaps we can have a word in the morning.

**JOHN HOLMES**

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