

From: ~~CONFIDENTIAL~~
THE PRIVATE SECRETARY



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Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
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25 February 1997

Dear John,

**NORTHERN IRELAND: THE PRIME MINISTER'S PRESS ARTICLE AND OUR
EXCHANGES WITH HUME/ADAMS**

Thank you for your letter of 24 February.

As you say, Hume sent us, on Friday, Adams' answers to our six questions. A copy is attached. He also sent us an advance copy of Adams' article which appeared in the Irish Times the following day.

As we might have expected, the answers send mixed signals. On one reading they do not reflect any dramatic change of heart by Adams and much - though not all - of the language we have seen before. But, on another, Adams does seem clearly engaged, he has not jibbed at being asked to answer our questions first, he seems to have treated the answers with a certain degree of seriousness, and the fact that he took the trouble to establish his position on the public record suggests that he is not treating the exercise lightly.

A previously sceptical senior Irish official has told us that he regards the Adams' article as highly significant and has collateral for an expectation in parts of the nationalist community that a ceasefire could be imminent. On the other hand, other elements in the Irish system remain sceptical while still urging us to call Adams' bluff.

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In short, there appears to be a degree of engagement from Adams which was not in evidence last year. In contrast to our failed efforts then to extract some text or commitment from Adams, we now have some significant commitments from him. On top of this, he appears to have moved closer to our own position in one or two areas and, for the first time, has started mirroring our own language in the 28 November statement (by referring to a "genuinely unequivocal" ceasefire and to an "indicative" timeframe for talks); all this implies a certain degree of seriousness. We were also struck by the fact that he did not return to the old liturgy about an immediate entry to talks.

A more detailed commentary on the answers is attached.

Handling

It has already been agreed (your minute of 12 February) that if Adams answered our questions, we would answer his. Hume is anxious to receive our replies as soon as possible, and the Secretary of State in a recent radio interview said that if questions were put to us we would consider answering them. The question therefore is whether we are now justified in continuing the process by giving answers to Sinn Féin's questions, in terms, of course, of existing policy.

Although stronger language from Adams would have been welcome, in particular in answers 1 and 5, in reality he was probably never going to give us the categorical language that we would have liked, nor would such language of itself necessarily guarantee how events on the ground would eventually play out. In weighing up how we

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proceed with this exercise we need to bear in mind that Adams may be serious, in which case he deserves a proper response; or he may be bluffing - in which case, as the Irish suggest, we should call his bluff.

Doing nothing is not a wise option. Adams has now claimed in public to have answered the points of concern to us and so has put the ball back in our court. His article could be read either way; either it was an attempt to bring the movement with him, or to stake out the high ground and put the pressure on us.

But Adams does seem to have gone out on a limb, for example in his answer to question 1 when he said that "We (Sinn Féin) can, with credibility, seek to persuade the IRA to restore the cessation of August 1994, when a meaningful and inclusive process of negotiations is genuinely being offered". This invites us to put him on the spot; we should make every effort to do so. He also interestingly added that any restoration "will be genuinely unequivocal, containing a clear and unambiguous commitment to enhance a genuine peace process".

- ii. As to your specific question about the current prospects for a new ceasefire, we have no new insights to offer. There are no signs that the IRA are contemplating a declared ceasefire in the near future - rather the reverse - but, then again, there were few firm indications in August 1994.

Not
sure this
is right.

the offer of a ceasefire is not of course unconditional, it depends on a meaningful and inclusive process of negotiations being genuinely offered. We think this comes down to three key assurances

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- that HMG is serious (and treating his questions seriously would go a long way to answering that);
- that Sinn Féin's entry into talks, after the IRA have called a ceasefire, is not as uncertain and open ended as they fear (in fact, once the requirements in the Ground Rules are met the Secretary of State is under a legal obligation to invite them);
- that the negotiations will not be blocked forever on the issue of decommissioning (Adams' article quotes the Prime Minister's own words that decommissioning needs to be resolved without blocking the negotiations).

Next Steps

The only realistic option is now to give answers to Sinn Féin's questions and to be prepared to publish them. We are preparing a paper to NI Committee seeking their agreement - perhaps for an NI meeting next week.

A fresh draft of our proposed answers is attached: there are few changes to the previous draft seen by the Prime Minister. You were concerned that the final part of the answer to Question 2 went beyond existing policy by, in effect, setting a firm time-limit for Sinn Féin's entry into talks. This does not develop new policy but draws out the point, as an example, that the occurrence of a natural break in the talks process for the election period provides an opportunity for Sinn Féin to earn their ticket to the talks within the requirements of the Ground Rules and the 28 November statement. If Sinn Féin meet the requirements of the Ground Rules they must be invited to the talks; that is a legal obligation (so "could" invite falls short).

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But by pointing to the natural break afforded by the election as an example we can signal that there is a clear opportunity for Sinn Féin to work their passage into the talks but over a timeframe which does not require us to change our position. We would not be offering an unconditional date. Without this pointer to our readiness to use the natural break over the elections, Sinn Féin will continue to claim that the timeframe for their entry after a ceasefire is open ended and could be as long as 18 months.

Prime Minister's press article

X You asked about the implications of the latest Hume/Adams exchanges for the Prime Minister's draft article. We think that there is a risk that an article now - although the draft is excellent - will be seen as a response to Adams' article. We think it best therefore to hold this article for now.

Conclusion

If the Prime Minister is content that we should now proceed to answer Hume's questions. We will circulate our answers to NI and put in hand arrangements for Michael Ancram to meet John Hume, towards perhaps the end of next week.

I am copying this letter to the Private Secretaries to the Foreign Secretary, Lord Privy Seal and Sir Robin Butler and to HM Ambassador, Dublin.

Signed

W K LINDSAY

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