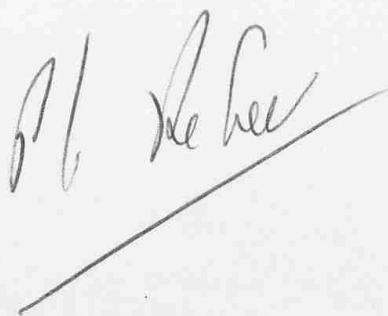


CONFIDENTIALFile
pm 6/3.

From: John Holmes
Date: 26 February 1997

PRIME MINISTER**HUME/ADAMS (AGAIN)**

Now that John Hume has given us Adams' answers to our questions, the NIO have predictably returned to the charge on answers to Adams' questions. I attach, flagged:

- NIO letter;
- Adams' answers to our questions, and NIO comments;
- the Adams' article and NIO comments;
- the proposed answers to the Hume/Adams' questions;
- the comments we sent NIO on this exercise last time round.

The nub of the NIO argument is that we now have no choice but to reply to the Adams questions, that there is just enough in Adams' article and answers to suggest a real possibility of a new ceasefire, and that even if this is not true, we should call Adams' bluff.

These are all perfectly good arguments. But, as usual, they take little account of the wider politics. I see two problems:

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

- 2 -

- despite the death of Stephen Restorick, we are again engaged in an exchange of texts with Sinn Fein which has not become public. Whatever our answers, we need to think through how to surface this, and how to prepare eg Trimble;
- the proposed NIO answer to Question 2 continues effectively to go further in its last paragraph than we were prepared to go in November/December. Despite its logic, it would be most unwelcome to the Unionists and a chunk of your backbenchers, especially after all the IRA violence of recent weeks and months.

The bottom line is how far you are prepared to go, despite IRA attacks and your worry about building up Sinn Fein's electoral credibility, to send a signal to Sinn Fein which might just produce a new ceasefire – which would of course not only be extremely welcome in itself but could also have a significant domestic impact.

(only if it's real)

(No, it wouldn't!)

On timing, there are a few obvious factors:

- (i) The talks are likely to be suspended in soft landing mode next Wednesday – in theory a good time to say something constructive about Sinn Fein's participation at their resumption.
- (ii) Hume is pressing hard for a response. If we delay and something ghastly happens, we will no doubt be accused by Hume of failing to take the chance to avert this (Paddy Mayhew is very worried about this, although I think his fears are exaggerated – an IRA bomb is the fault of the IRA).

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

- 3 -

- (iii) The next couple of weeks are obviously sensitive. It could be much easier to say something controversial about Sinn Fein's entry in mid-late March (the Taoiseach has had similar thoughts).

On the substance of the draft answers, as you will see there is the usual full quota of Anglo-Irish verbiage. They could be a lot shorter, sharper and more user-friendly – eg the answer to Question 1 could stop at “Yes” – and Unionist-friendly! But, as I have suggested, the key is the answer to Question 2. It would be perfectly possible to delete the last paragraph altogether – there are plenty of assurances earlier in the answer about our determination to avoid delay. Or alternative formulations could be found eg “Sinn Fein can be invited to join the talks when they resume after the elections if (and only if) there is an early enough and credible enough ceasefire to meet the requirements we have set out”.

But I should warn you that Paddy is still very attached to what the NIO are proposing – he rang me this afternoon to say so. His underlying point is that a ceasefire must be a good thing, and that we cannot honourably let pass even a slim chance of bringing one about.

On procedure, if you confirm what we said before, that we should answer the questions if Adams answered ours, we will need NI cover, whatever the content of the answers is to be. We will therefore need to set up a meeting next week.

My instinct is that we now cannot credibly sit tight altogether. Our basic message must remain that it is for Sinn Fein/IRA to produce a ceasefire, rather than messing about with articles/questions etc. But I think that we still have to answer the questions, in as constructive a way as we can manage – without going

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

- 4 -

as far as the NIO want; that it will be difficult (though not impossible) to avoid giving the answers in the next couple of weeks; that whatever we do we will need to prepare the way with Trimble and others but, first of all with Cranborne; and that we should go public on the substance of our answers when we give them to Hume, perhaps in the form of an article by you, picking up the draft "violence" piece you agreed over the weekend and adding in appropriate bits of language.

Paddy wants to have a word with you about all this tomorrow morning after Cabinet, if possible (but you have got the Business Managers). Perhaps we can have a word first thing in the morning.

I realise you need all this like a hole in the head.

**JOHN HOLMES****CONFIDENTIAL**