

From: THE ~~CONFIDENTIAL~~ PRIVATE SECRETARYcc-PB
JH

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John Holmes Esq
Private Secretary to the
Prime Minister
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Prime Minister
Formal confirmation of what
you already know. The prospects
for a genuinely soft landing
would reasonably good. 3 March 1997
There is a remaining awkwardness
about the Forum, but this can effectively
be judged, as the letter makes
clear. John 3/3.

Dear John,

NORTHERN IRELAND TALKS

I am writing to confirm that the multi-party negotiations now seem likely to be suspended on Wednesday 5 March for the duration of the election period (which in Northern Ireland will last until after the District Council elections on 21 May).

It is now clear beyond doubt that there is no prospect of reaching even a limited measure of agreement on the issue of decommissioning before the elections. You will recall at the end of January we had developed some proposals of our own, based on the Mitchell compromise approach, and put them to the UUP: these were not ruled out and in his letter of 6 February to the Prime Minister, David Trimble said that these ideas "if they were developed further could help on the decommissioning issue". But he had previously made clear to the Secretary of State and Michael Ancram that the UUP would not be able to support them at this stage so we have not sought to pursue them with the Irish Government or SDLP. For the past two weeks the Independent Chairmen have been engaged in a "mediation" exercise in an effort to complete the limited agreement on the "mechanisms" of decommissioning which the UUP, SDLP and Alliance Party came close to last December, but at last Wednesday's plenary they were forced to conclude that there was an insufficient basis for agreement at present. At our suggestion they have

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launched a further round of consultation on what should be the next step in the negotiations, but it is widely accepted that this will focus on the terms for achieving a "soft landing" at next Wednesday's plenary meeting.

The issue of decommissioning is of course a proxy for the deeper question of whether the Unionist parties are prepared to envisage negotiating with Sinn Féin in any circumstances, even in the event that all the criteria set by the Government in respect of Sinn Féin's entry to the negotiations are met. It may be that their objections to this and their determination to introduce additional hurdles to full Sinn Féin participation will continue after the election period. What is patently clear, however, is that the UUP is not prepared to make a decisive break with the very hardline DUP and UKUP position on this fundamental and emotive issue before the election. The UUP clearly calculate that any such move (leading to agreement with the SDLP) could be exploited by the other Unionist parties to their electoral disadvantage. That factor will by definition be less powerful after the election period and there are some grounds for believing that (depending on the relative performance of the Unionist parties in the two elections) a deal acceptable to the two Governments, the UUP and the SDLP could be worked out then.

Meanwhile the main risk is that in the absence of any measure of agreement on decommissioning there will be a spate of recriminations, especially between those whose eventual agreement is central to any subsequent forward movement - the UUP and SDLP. The UUP's recent tactics and their ultimate loss of nerve have not endeared them to the SDLP, Alliance Party or the four smaller parties. Although the SDLP seem grudgingly to accept that it will

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be unhelpful to engage in recriminations, they have made clear that they will defend themselves. The smaller parties may have fewer inhibitions and the UUP shows every sign of being determined to get its retaliation in first. Ministers may need to work hard to exert a calming influence.

One feature of the current scene is that everyone is getting their defensive tackle in order and seeking to manufacture evidence that they have not been found wanting in the search for agreement. The DUP and UKUP point to hardline proposals they tabled several weeks ago. The SDLP and Alliance Party have been rehearsing the lengths which they were prepared to go in the search for agreement. The UUP has put written proposals to both Governments (albeit dealing with matters which cannot be progressed without at least some measure of prior agreement among the talks community as a whole) and has promoted the idea of a "leaders' meeting" to seek a breakthrough. None of this seems likely, or seriously intended, to achieve anything of substance.

Looking behind the various smokescreens, however, it seems most likely that the parties will all next Wednesday accept the Chairman's judgement that the talks should be suspended until a fixed date after the election period, probably Monday 2 June. My Secretary of State will seek to summarise and project the positive elements in the situation and set out the rational grounds for believing that progress will be possible once the shadow of the elections has been lifted. I attach a checklist of the key points he will be aiming to get across, on which the Prime Minister and other Cabinet colleagues may also be able to draw. Once the talks are adjourned my Secretary of State will consider the implication for the Forum. Under the Entry to Negotiations etc Act he may bring forward an Order, which will be subject to affirmative resolution in both Houses, to suspend the Northern Ireland Forum. Indeed, if the Talks are "concluded or suspended", he must do so.

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Immediate action on the Forum will be unpopular with all the Unionist parties, but strongly supported by the SDLP, the main Opposition parties and the Irish Government. In practice an Order would be unlikely to take effect much before the election is called and as all the parties accept that the Forum should not meet during the election campaigns and it will lapse in any event at the end of May (requiring a further Order to renew its existence for a further year) my Secretary of State hopes to be able to minimise any adverse reactions.

Although my Secretary of State is disappointed that it has not been possible to secure even a limited measure of agreement on the decommissioning issue before the election period, he regards it as something of an achievement that the process has been kept running to beyond the end of February. That has been significant in helping to restrain the Loyalist paramilitaries at times of heightened tension, and it has reduced the risk that a damaging political vacuum might develop. A measure of agreement in the talks would have created a firmer basis for sustaining the process through the inevitable pause over the election period, and making progress on resumption, but at least the interval is now shorter than it would have been.

I am sending copies of this letter to the Private Secretaries to members of NI and to Sir Robin Butler.

Yours ever,

Ken.
W K LINDSAY

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