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MINISTERIAL COMMITTEE ON NORTHERN IRELAND

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EXCHANGES WITH JOHN HUME

Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland

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Hume has put to us questions emanating from Sinn Fein about the Government's position on negotiations. I seek authority to supply him with answers, which will lie firmly within our declared policy.

Hume/Adams approach

2. In January Hume came to us with some amendments from Adams to an old text Hume had put forward in October last year, saying it would secure an IRA ceasefire if we adopted it. I told Hume that such an approach would not work: so did the Irish Government. Our position, I told him, is determined by the statutory requirements and described in the Prime Minister's statement of 28 November 1996. I said that if there were any genuine uncertainties, we would be prepared to consider questions he put to us. I have repeated this in public.

3. Hume dropped his approach based on the October text. Instead he came forward on 31 January with five questions again emanating from Adams. When on my behalf Michael Ancram met Hume on 13 February, he, rather than respond straightaway, gave Hume (with the Prime Minister's agreement) six questions of our own about Sinn Fein's position, on the basis that if Adams answered our questions we would answer his.

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4. Sinn Fein gave answers, through Hume, on 21 February. These are at Annex A, which also incorporates our questions. Adams published an expanded version of his answers (but without attributing them to questions asked by HMG) in an article in the Irish Times on 22 February. There is reason to believe that the answers and the article have the authority of the IRA leadership. Both the Irish and US Governments are aware of these exchanges.

Sinn Fein's answers

5. Adams has given our questions serious, if fairly predictable, answers. Of significance:

- Sinn Fein can "with credibility" seek an IRA ceasefire "when a meaningful and inclusive process of negotiations is genuinely being offered". *It is doubtful whether* Adams would ~~not~~ say this unless he were confident that an IRA ceasefire *could indeed be delivered (although it will always be open to him to argue that we are not offering meaningful and inclusive negotiations, whatever we say);*
- Sinn Fein believes that any restoration of the IRA ceasefire "will be genuinely unequivocal, containing a clear and unambiguous commitment to enhance a genuine peace process". "Genuinely unequivocal" is language from our own 28 November statement;
- Sinn Fein will sign up to the Mitchell Principles and will address the Mitchell proposals on decommissioning (which is all that is required of other parties). Sinn Fein adopt the Prime Minister's own language that decommissioning must be "resolved but without blocking the negotiations";
- there is no mention of Sinn Fein's previous insistence on immediate entry to negotiations.

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6. Adams' answers fall short of what we would have liked to hear. But they do suggest that our response needs to treat Sinn Fein's questions seriously, and be seen to do so, ~~if they are not to wrong-foot us.~~

(7. The article explains, in the plainest terms, that a ceasefire is available if a meaningful and inclusive process of negotiations is "genuinely being offered".)

7. In deciding how any answers should be framed we need to consider ~~six~~ ^{five} factors in particular:

- (i) The inherent desirability of any ceasefire

although it might unhelpfully boost Sinn Fein's electoral prospects,

We cannot rule out the possibility that this approach is intended to lead to a real ceasefire. In any event, ^{in other ways} any ceasefire would be preferable to none, provided we had not traded for it, nor acquiesced in something that falls short of our declared requirements. We must not allow Sinn Fein to wrong-foot us into appearing to be the obstacle to a ceasefire.

- (ii) Prospects for a ceasefire

IRA attacks on the security forces are reaching pre-1994 levels, with intensive planning and preparation for more, and for further attacks in Great Britain. While no ceasefire is in place the IRA will continue to fight a terrorist war. There are few signs of preparations for a ceasefire, but then we picked up few in August 1994. It remains our assessment, as the JIC concluded last year, that Sinn Fein's primary objective is to gain entry into inclusive negotiations on certain terms following a ceasefire.

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There are, of course, tactical advantages for Sinn Fein in an IRA ceasefire before the elections - or in trying to wrong foot us so that the IRA gets less of the blame for continued violence. ~~But we cannot know whether there is a real prospect of a ceasefire nor, if there is, whether it will be purely tactical or not.~~

- (iii) ~~the~~ The statutory position *There is certainly no current evidence to suggest that the IRA is ready to give up the option of violence for good.*

The requirements that must be met if Sinn Fein is to participate in negotiations are laid down in statute (as set out at Annex B). [There must be an unequivocal restoration of the IRA ceasefire and Sinn Fein must establish a commitment to exclusively peaceful methods and have shown that they abide by the democratic process.] Once I consider these requirements are met, I am obliged by the statute to invite Sinn Fein 'as soon as practicable'.

- (iv) Testing any ceasefire for credibility: possible use of elections period.

(In the autumn, NI thought that a long Christmas recess in the talks of two months would give sufficient time to reach a considered view on a pre-Christmas IRA ceasefire so that, if the necessary requirements had been met, Sinn Fein could have joined the talks at their resumption in late January. But we did not say so in public. *)*

I expect that the talks will, this Wednesday, be put in cold storage for the period over the general election and Northern Ireland's local elections on 21 May. We expect agreement to resume on 2 June. That means there is now potentially a period of up to three months in which to judge an early ceasefire before any question arises as to Sinn Fein's participation in talks. ~~That is rather longer than the time period we had in mind last year.~~

we had in mind a similar period to test an IRA ceasefire last autumn, although we subsequently moved away from setting down a specific period.

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(v) Fostering confidence in HMG's good faith

The Irish and US Governments, though supportive in public, believe that it was the lack of certainty in December over the sort of time period we had in mind for assessing a ceasefire which meant that ~~the IRA did not~~ ^{whatever chance there may have been of} ~~declare a ceasefire before Christmas~~ ^{disappeared.} If we wish to remove any remaining doubts among our friends as to where responsibility for continuing violence firmly rests, there is advantage in doing something to nail the Sinn Fein lie that we might even be contemplating spinning matters out by requiring as long a period as 18 months. In doing so, we must not however depart from existing policy.

(vi) Unionist reaction

Unionists want Sinn Fein to be treated as irredeemable: they will criticise any exchange with Sinn Fein, ^{and will be deeply sceptical of any ceasefire. They may declare that, if Sinn Fein are invited to join the talks when they resume, they will not return themselves.} But if we stick, as I must, to the statutory position and the statement of 28 November (Annex C), our position is consistent and defensible.

9. In the light of all this I believe that answers should treat the questions seriously, while sticking to conventional expressions of declared policy. Adams' article makes clear that the question of whether, in Sinn Fein's view, talks are "genuinely being offered" by HMG turns on four specific issues. The draft answers set out in Annex D ~~actually~~ ^{Adopting} address each of these, ~~particularly if we adopt~~ the enlarged draft answer to Question 2 (see pages 15/16) ~~That passage~~ would remove any ground for the false suspicion that we intend the process of entry to be spun out. For that reason it ~~may~~ ^{could} be of crucial influence on Republican actions as well as fostering confidence in HMG. But we would in effect be setting a specific timeframe in a way we were careful to avoid doing before Christmas. The Committee will wish to consider carefully the balance of advantage here.

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Publication

10. We shall need to publish the substance of any answers we give, Adams, has already effectively published his answers to our questions ^{in an article. We could choose to do the same.} In handing answers to Hume, I would ~~therefore~~ tell him that we planned to publish our answers, but at a time and in a form of our own choosing.

when we give them or very soon afterwards.

Conclusion

11. I seek authority to give Hume the draft answers at Annex D, as may be approved or varied by the Committee, with the intention of publishing them.

PM

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