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Ref: BO.2240

PRIME MINISTER

cc Sir Robin Butler

Meeting of NI on Thursday 6 January 1997 at 11.30am

1. The Chancellor of the Exchequer will be absent on a visit abroad, but all other NI members (Deputy Prime Minister, Foreign Secretary, Home Secretary, Northern Ireland Secretary, Defence Secretary, Lord Privy Seal and Attorney General) will attend, as will the Chief Whip. The Ministers of State, Northern Ireland Office (Sir John Wheeler and Michael Ancram) and the Permanent Secretary (Sir John Chilcot) will also be present.

Papers

2. The Northern Ireland Secretary has circulated a memorandum, NI(97)4, on exchanges with John Hume.

Objective

3. To decide whether, and if so how, to answer five questions which were put to us by Mr Hume on 31 January on behalf of Gerry Adams.

Background

4. These exchanges with Adams, through Hume, are a continuation of those which took place in September and October 1996 and which culminated in the Government's statement of 28 November 1996, setting out its approach to Sinn Fein's participation in the talks. On 31 January Hume, in consultation with Adams, put five questions to the Government, with a view to clarifying the conditions for Sinn

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Fein's entry to the Talks. Michael Ancram responded with six questions addressed to Sinn Fein. There was an implicit understanding that we would answer Hume's questions if Sinn Fein gave serious answers to our questions. On 21 February we received those answers.

5. The Northern Ireland Secretary's memorandum:

- seeks authority to answer Hume's questions;
- in particular floats the possibility of going beyond the statement of 28 November by giving a commitment to allowing Sinn Fein to join the talks in June, if PIRA were now to declare a genuine ceasefire.

6. The key judgement for NI Committee is how best to strike a balance between keeping open the door for PIRA to call a genuine ceasefire, and reducing the opportunity for Sinn Fein to make electoral capital from these exchanges in the run up to the General Election.

7. The Northern Ireland Secretary considers that our response needs to treat Sinn Fein's questions seriously and that we cannot rule out the possibility that the Adams approach is intended to lead to a real ceasefire. He believes that our good faith would be reinforced by stating that Sinn Fein could join the talks on their resumption in June, should PIRA resume its ceasefire now on a convincingly unequivocal basis. He is likely accordingly to argue for the inclusion of the bracketed passage shown in the draft answer to Hume's Question 2. He recognises that the Unionists would be offended by such a commitment, but points out that as and when Sinn Fein meet the statutory criteria, the 1996 Act already requires us to admit them: committing ourselves to a contingent date does no more than recognise our legal obligations.

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8. For the rest, the answers proposed to Sinn Fein's questions follow closely the language of the statement of 28 November 1996. There are longer and shorter versions of the answer to Question 1.

The shorter version is much better.

9. Much of the same ground was covered before Christmas when considering the possibility of Sinn Fein declaring a Christmas ceasefire. The difference now is that the imminence of a General Election throws the tactical and presentational issues into sharper focus.

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Issues

12. Discussion might cover the following areas:

- Does NI consider that a commitment (on the basis mooted by the Northern Ireland Secretary) to grant Sinn Fein entry to the talks when they resume in

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June would increase the likelihood of their declaring a ceasefire in advance of the Election? If such a commitment is to be given, should it not be made subject to the declaration of a ceasefire by a given date (since there would otherwise be much unprofitable argument about the definition of "now")?

- Is there a risk that by appearing to be in dialogue with Sinn Fein the Government would strengthen their position in the forthcoming election at the expense of the SDLP? Or would a failure on the part of Sinn Fein to seize the opportunity of entry to the talks damage their electoral prospects? Should we view these exchanges as a potential trap for the Government or as an opportunity to trap Sinn Fein?
- What view does NI take of the likely Unionist response to a commitment to grant Sinn Fein entry to the talks after the election, assuming that a credible ceasefire is put in place now?
- Does NI agree with the Northern Ireland Secretary that there is a danger in the Government appearing in the eyes of the Irish and US to obstruct the peace process if it fails to respond constructively to the questions posed by Sinn Fein? Would this concern be met by a response which did not include setting a date for entry into the talks?
- How does the Committee consider that the Government's answers should be handled so as to minimise the opportunity for Sinn Fein to exploit them to its advantage? They must be published. Would it be preferable for them to be contained in an article (as were Adams's answers) rather than in a free standing document?

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Handling

13. Before asking the Northern Ireland Secretary to introduce his paper, you might ask him to bring the Committee up to date with the progress of the talks. When he has introduced his paper you will want to invite comments.

Conclusions

14. Subject to the discussion, you may be able to sum up that the Committee:

- agreed that, while recognising the risks of bolstering Sinn Fein's electoral position, there was advantage in responding constructively to the questions which they had posed;
- agreed that it would be preferable not to give a commitment to any particular timescale for Sinn Fein's entry to the talks following a ceasefire;
- agreed that the response should be published in the form of an article by yourself or the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. The language of the article should be drawn from Annex D of NI(97)4, using the shorter version of the answer to Question 1.

Colin Budd

COLIN BUDD

5 March 1997

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