

From: THE ~~CONFIDENTIAL~~ PRIVATE SECRETARY

CG:PS



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F.4

PM 44

20 March 1997

Dear John,

**SINN FEIN'S QUESTIONS**

Thank you for your letter of 17 March in which you raised the question of our strategy for publishing the Hume/Adams exchanges. In one of our phone calls yesterday you also posed a question as to whether we needed to publish the exchanges at all and where the balance of advantage lay.

To an extent, the course of events will be dictated by the response which we get from John Hume, once he hears back from Adams. Michael Ancram is expecting to hear from him today (Thursday). Hume still hankers after publication of our answers as part of a grand announcement centred around a new ceasefire and, were events to move in that direction, my Secretary of State would not object to our answers being deployed in that way.

On the other hand it might be that Hume will come back and tell us that our answers have not taken the trick. In that event there might be a question of whether there was any merit in publishing the answers at all. The advantages of holding back are that we would avoid - or at least put off for the moment - any controversy about the exchanges and, in particular, any potential turbulence from David Trimble. If the answers were to leak at some future point they should not do us any severe damage because they have all been written in accordance with the current orthodoxies.

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But in Sir Patrick's view there are stronger arguments why publication would still make sense. Rather than leaving ourselves open to future leaks or innuendo there is quite a strong case for making a clean breast soon and publishing the material at a time and in a manner which we can properly control. More significantly, by publishing the material we keep the pressure on Sinn Fein. The community at large would see that we had taken a reasonable position and the onus would be on Sinn Fein to explain why they needed more. If we do not publish, we allow them off the hook.

Sir Patrick's preference, therefore, is to publish the exchanges fairly soon, though in a low key way. Mr Trimble and Dr Mowlam would have to be briefed before that. Unless Hume's response requires greater urgency we would be content to see publication slip into the middle or end of next week; we want to give Sinn Fein a reasonable amount of time to assess the answers and, if necessary, make dispositions within Sinn Fein.

We envisage that, when we do come to publish, we would simply release the Secretary of State's letter under cover of a short press release, and that we would add our questions to Sinn Fein, and Adams' answers, to the package. Sinn Fein could hardly complain about us publishing their answers since they are already in the public domain in Adams' Irish Times article of 22 February. Mr Secretary of State would make himself available for interviews with the press and media.

We would let you see a more detailed handling plan nearer the time; this will include a suggestion that members of NI Committee should be informed the day before publication.

A copy goes to Jan Polley in the Cabinet Office.

Yours ever,

*Ken*

W K LINDSAY

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