

CONFIDENTIAL*File
John
27/3.**Thank you,
J***From: John Holmes**
Date: 21 March 1997**cc: Philip Barton****PRIME MINISTER****NORTHERN IRELAND**

You will see from a separate report in the box that the IRA may shortly suspend military operations until after the British and Irish elections. This may be announced in the next week. The report looks reasonably reliable, but the nature of any public announcement is unclear – it seems likely to be a suspension without a timeframe rather than a ceasefire as such. One obvious danger is that the IRA will want to go out with a bang.

This is good news, and a vindication of our stand, if it happens. Our reaction will depend on what is said at the time. A fully-fledged ceasefire would put pressure on us to comment on whether Sinn Fein can be admitted to the talks when they resume. A suspension, with the clear implication that violence can be resumed at any time, would be easier to handle. But our general line is clear: a cautious welcome, with emphasis on the need to see deeds as well as words, and a call for an end to violence for good.

It is not clear how any suspension is related to the latest Hume/Adams questions exercise, if at all. My guess is that there is no relationship, and that Sinn Fein will not make one. I had in any case been coming to the conclusion that there is little point in our publishing the exchange if it is not itself going to lead anywhere, if Hume and the Irish are against publication, and if the danger of an embarrassing leak is relatively slight. Even if the exchange did come out, there

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is nothing in our replies which would cause us serious trouble with Trimble et al, given that we have not set a date.

But we do not need to take any decisions on this immediately. Quite apart from the latest intelligence, Hume is supposed to be coming back to us in the next few days. We can wait to see how events pan out.

Separately, Paddy Mayhew is getting ready to announce the establishment of the planned Parades Commission, following the North Report. He will minute you and the rest of NI formally about this early next week, but I understand that he has finally scraped together five names ready to take on the task, having had huge difficulty and many refusals. The Chairman is likely to be Alastair Graham, former head of one of the Civil Service Unions and currently heading the Industrial Society. Paddy has kept in close touch with Mo Mowlam about all this.

This is of course without prejudice to the separate consultation on whether the Commission should have the power to adjudicate on parades. The consultation period finishes at the end of March. For obvious reasons, nothing will then happen until after the Election.

Finally, you should be aware that the Jean Denton affair continues to rumble on. Although the announcement of an independent enquiry took most of the heat out of the situation, further charges of sectarianism in personnel matters continue to dribble out in the Northern Irish press. Meanwhile she is apparently unhappy that a former civil servant may be looking into her own behaviour. Paddy Mayhew has been talking to her, and thinks this is all manageable, but you may

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like to be aware that she continues to feel beleaguered, not least since Cranborne may mention it to you at some point. Maurice Hayes' report is likely to come out in the third week of April, although it is also possible that it will be delayed until after the Election. I am keeping a close eye.

Never a dull moment! I will obviously be in touch if we hear any more on the ceasefire/suspension front.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'John', with a stylized, cursive script.

JOHN HOLMES

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