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John
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From: John Holmes
Date: 24 March 1997

PRIME MINISTER

NORTHERN IRELAND

*the Olay story is not good.
Please it is wonderful
but please watch the 25.3*

1. The pot continues to bubble on the Sinn Fein front. Over the weekend, John Hume sent Michael Ancram a revised version of the answers we had sent to Sinn Fein's questions. The revision, clearly written by Adams, committed us to allowing Sinn Fein into the talks as soon as they declare a ceasefire, and also had all sorts of unacceptable stuff about a definite timeframe for the talks, decommissioning and policing.

2. It is clearly out of the question for us to revise answers we have already sent, still less in the directions suggested by Hume/Adams. Michael Ancram is trying to set up a meeting with Hume in the next day or two, to try to establish what is going on more clearly, and to make clear that we are not going to depart from the 28 November line.

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3. I am keeping a close eye on the NIO, in case they are tempted down the wrong route. The relationship between the intelligence you saw over the weekend and the Hume/Adams exercise is still unclear. It may well be that a decision has been taken to go for a suspension/ceasefire, and that Adams is now desperately trying to extract as much cover from us as possible, not least to help satisfy IRA hardliners. This points to hanging tough, but we cannot simply tell Hume to get lost.

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I attach a short background note on the Maze tunnel, discovered on Sunday evening. As the note makes clear, although it is good news that the tunnel was discovered, there are serious, long-standing problems at the Maze. The Prison Officers Association spokesman has been bringing these out today. I doubt if this will run as a major story, but it is one to watch. If asked, your line must be to focus on the good news side of the story, while pointing to the difficulties of dealing with dangerous terrorist prisoners.

**JOHN HOLMES****CONFIDENTIAL**