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WED 26 MAR 97 20:28
SECRET AND PERSONAL
 FROM: THE PRIVATE SECRETARY

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cc: TB
 JH.



NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE

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26 March 1997

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Dear John

~~POSSIBLE ANNOUNCEMENT BY THE IRA~~

As you know, [redacted] the Provisional movement might be considering announcing a suspension of operations for an unspecified period. This might seem improbable given the lack of any obvious build up to an announcement and in view of today's bomb incidents in Wilmslow and Doncaster, which look like the work of the IRA. But in the perverse mentality of the Republican movement it would not be inconsistent for attacks to continue right up to the moment a suspension is declared. One possibility is that, having started the current phase of violence with a bomb on the mainland, they will end it in the same way.

[redacted] It appears that, within the movement, the suspension would be related to the forthcoming sequence of elections, including not only the general election but also the Northern Ireland local elections on 21 May and possibly, depending on the timing, the Irish general election. [redacted]

[redacted] the suspension could have the potential to evolve into a permanent ceasefire, particularly if the leadership can show that this would bring Sinn Fein into the Talks when they resume on 3 June.

SECRET AND PERSONAL

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If an announcement is made, it could come quite soon. Easter is a significant date in the Republican calendar. Sir Patrick has asked me to alert you to the line he would intend to take in public, if an announcement along the lines mentioned above is forthcoming.

It goes without saying that the Government's initial response will be crucial to the way that its position is perceived both in the Republican movement and more widely. It is therefore vital that we strike the right note both in terms of tone and content. A suspension of IRA operations for a limited period would, of course, fall well short of what we want from the IRA. The Government's position is abundantly clear; there is no justification for continuing violence in any form and a new ceasefire must be convincingly unequivocal.

Nevertheless, we should not dismiss out of hand a suspension of operations in the terms described above, especially if there is reason to believe that the Republican leadership have constructed it in such a way that it could evolve into a permanent ceasefire. The leadership may have calculated that the best way to work towards a lasting ceasefire, in terms of carrying the membership with them, is through a gradualist approach.

With this in mind, my Secretary of State believes that the right posture for the Government to strike is to balance regret that this is not, on the face of it, the unequivocal ceasefire that we require, against an acknowledgement that any halt to IRA activity has to be regarded as a step in the right direction, urging that the suspension evolves so as to become permanent. I attach our proposed lines to take.

Exchanges with John Hume

The connection between Michael Ancram's recent exchanges with John Hume and the possibility of this announcement from the IRA is uncertain. There are some signs which suggest that a ceasefire announcement does not depend on the Hume/Adams exchanges; but others suggest the opposite.

If the Republican leadership is genuinely interested in bringing about a new ceasefire then the election period offers a useful opportunity to at least launch a suspension. If they are not interested in a real ceasefire then a suspension could still be useful for bolstering their election prospects, not only in terms of their overall share of the vote but as regards actual Westminster seats. Thus, a suspension now could be just tactical, or presented as such to the movement, or could be part of a longer term plan for a permanent ceasefire. It is probably in the latter context that the exchanges with Hume would be of relevance, but we would be ready to publish the correspondence with Hume at short notice if this appeared necessary as a result of the IRA announcement.

Copies of this letter go to the Private Secretaries to the other members of NI and to Jan Polley in the Cabinet Office.

Signed

W K LINDSAY