

6. May. 1997 12:45

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No. 4913 P. 2/11



## PRIME MINISTER

### NORTHERN IRELAND: OUR APPROACH

This minute sets out how I propose to tackle the key peace/talks issues in the coming month. It also suggests I should write to Adams, to reply to his letter to you (and a similar one to me) but also to get our fundamental principles on the record with him.

#### Fundamental Principles

2. I have already issued a statement reaffirming continuity of some key principles:

- consent;
- the need for a settlement on which both unionists and nationalists agree, ultimately endorsed in a referendum;
- our determination to pursue the current talks process, which resumes on 3 June;
- a way is open for Sinn Fein to join that process, on proper terms;
- but we shall carry it forward with or without Sinn Fein.

3. We shall repeat these fundamental messages at every opportunity. I shall be doing so in my initial round of meetings with the party leaders. I have already seen David Trimble, John Hume and John Alderdice.

#### Talks Process

4. This resumes on 3 June. Formally it remains stuck on the issue of decommissioning. But, in reality, the real issue everyone has their eyes on - unionists and nationalists - is whether Sinn Fein will join the negotiations after an IRA ceasefire.

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5. Failing miracles, Sinn Fein will not be there on 3 June. We have to be seen to be as good as our word and carry the talks forward without them. That means trying to find an approach on decommissioning which both unionists and nationalists will accept. The Irish Government already have some proposals prepared by the previous British Government. I suggest you press for a response from the Taoiseach when you see him.

6. We may find everyone will be more accommodating than they were before the elections - in which case, we can do a deal on decommissioning and move forward onto the real political issues. But my guess is that most eyes will be on Sinn Fein. Regardless of what we do, the prospect that Sinn Fein might join the negotiations after a fresh ceasefire will inhibit both unionists and nationalists from taking up forward positions on decommissioning.

Giving impetus to peace

7. So there is no avoiding the peace issue. But the case for exploring any opportunity for peace is more than this:

- it is right in principle: if there is an opportunity to secure a ceasefire we must explore it;
- a ceasefire would be the single thing most likely to improve overall prospects for Northern Ireland, even at the cost of losing the current talks process which is only a means to an end; and
- we seize the moral high ground from Sinn Fein: either we draw them in to the political process, which is what we want, or we have increased the political cost to them of continuing terrorism.

8. So we should make, and be seen to make, a push for peace. But we must be able to show we remain consistent with the principles of the previous Government, if not necessarily every detail of their positions. We must also do what we can to reassure unionists.

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9. I propose therefore to write to Adams, as in the attached draft. This sets out the fundamentals of our approach in an orthodox way which is consistent with the previous Government's position. Specifically, it reaffirms consent, the need for both unionist and nationalist agreement, and Sinn Fein meeting the statutory requirements before they are admitted to talks - including an unequivocal restoration of the ceasefire reflected in words and deeds. It also repeats our desire to see Sinn Fein in the political process, providing this is on proper terms.

10. I propose to sign the letter myself, where previous practice was for letters to be signed by Private Secretaries. This never cut much ice with unionists, whereas my personal engagement potentially does send an important message to republicans. While writing an orthodox message, the tone and approach will be seen to have changed.

A meeting between Sinn Fein and officials

11. Adams has asked for a meeting with officials. The letter to Adams repeats the previous Government's line - a meeting with officials is possible, even without a ceasefire, subject to "events on the ground" - code for not in the immediate aftermath of bombs and murders.

12. If we want to move the peace process forward, we have to have some contact with Sinn Fein: The choice is between direct contact of this sort or through intermediaries. The latter carry dangers of our messages being distorted.

13. The last Government authorised one meeting between officials and Sinn Fein in February 1996 after the ceasefire was abandoned and acknowledged it publicly. Mr Major when Prime Minister repeated that a further meeting was, in principle, possible, subject to events on the ground, although a further one was never authorised. So we can defend it as no change in policy.

14. If you agree, I would make the fact of this letter public and brief on its contents - then no-one can accuse us of making underhand approaches. But I think it best not to

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**publish the letter in full:** Adams has not published his letter to you. Success will depend upon having some private dialogue.

Sinn Fein's entry to talks

15. If we are to open up this sort of approach, we must have a clear idea of what we are prepared to say to Sinn Fein. The four issues they have identified are:

certainty of entry to negotiations: Sinn Fein will want to be certain that, following a ceasefire, they will get into negotiations without prevarication or undue delay.

We have to stick by the requirements established in statute. But we could offer a formula along the lines of: "If an unequivocal restoration of the IRA ceasefire was declared now and words and deeds were consistent so that the statutory requirements were met, then Sinn Fein would be invited to participate in negotiations by X date" (the date might be, depending on when the formula was deployed, some two or three months hence). Since this formula turns on meeting the requirements established by the previous Government, it will be difficult for them to attack. The Irish and US Governments could be expected to press Sinn Fein to accept it;

no pre-conditions to negotiations: this is the position adopted by the previous Government. What Sinn Fein are on the lookout for is whether decommissioning will be resurrected as a pre-condition, or as an inevitable barrier to progress in the negotiations. We should base our position, as did the previous Government, on implementing the Mitchell report which called for some decommissioning during negotiations. Sinn Fein have said they can support the Mitchell report, although all the signs are that a vast gulf remains between their understanding of it and the unionists. This may yet prove a show stopper but if we can get a ceasefire declared and get Sinn Fein signed up to the Mitchell principles and the Mitchell report, we have made enormous progress. Ultimately, it is the republican mindset, as much as their arms, which we want to decommission;

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- a time frame for negotiations: Sinn Fein's position has shifted. They no longer insist on a fixed time frame imposed by both Governments. **The last Government said it was prepared to propose an indicative time frame for agreement by all the participants.** We can do the same: this should satisfy Sinn Fein; and
- confidence building measures: Sinn Fein have highlighted the need for movement on prisoners, policing reform and equity issues. We are committed to policing reform anyway and I shall be pressing for legislation in the first session. I believe we can do much to improve the general climate by defusing the issue of republican prisoners in England. I am writing to Jack Straw pressing for early action.

16. We do not have to agree now on the detail of all these issues. But we should not get into an approach to Sinn Fein unless we are prepared to contemplate something like the positions I have proposed. I believe they are right on their merits and defensible as in line with the previous Government's policy.

17. **I believe this is the right approach and it will give us a good position with the Irish Government and nationalists. Many in Great Britain will applaud a positive attempt to probe the prospects for peace, particularly if a ceasefire results.**

18. **Unionists will be suspicious and that is a reality to be faced. But, from my discussion with David Trimble yesterday, I believe that if - and it is a big if - a ceasefire resulted, which he, and his supporters in Northern Ireland, agreed was genuine, then he would also do business with Sinn Fein (and recognise that, on that scenario decommissioning is not the central issue).**

#### Overall programme

19. To sum up, the sort of integrated programme I envisage is:

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- continued reassurance on the fundamental principles - consent, need for unionist and nationalist agreement, the way is open for Sinn Fein but there must first be an unequivocal restoration of the ceasefire;
- early package of confidence building measures, designed to appeal to both sides;
- prepare for start of talks on 3 June, by emphasising commitment to proceed with or without Sinn Fein and exploring scope, with the Irish Government and the UUP in particular, for progress on the decommissioning issue;
- early approach to Sinn Fein in a letter to Adams, but emphasising continuity with the fundamental principles of the previous Government. This could be expected to lead to an early meeting between officials and Sinn Fein, intended to explore whether the basis for a restoration of the ceasefire exists; and
- a continuing effort to present a coherent approach in public which strikes a fair balance and shows the Government pursuing its own approach rather than responding to others.

20. You may want to discuss. I should like to write to Adams this week if possible. I expect to meet leaders from the other main parties over the next couple of days.

21. A copy goes to Sir Robin Butler.

*J. McNeill*  
PP MM

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