

CONFIDENTIAL

PM

You asked for a note on this.
I suggest we discuss this with
John Holmes tomorrow to decide on
what sort of initiative we want

From: John Holmes

Date: 3 May 1997

cc: Mr Powell

PRIME MINISTER

NORTHERN IRELAND

1. You wanted a short snapshot and a few thoughts. Mo/the NIO will want to offer considered advice soon. This is obviously very sensitive territory, and you will wish to look at all the options carefully.
2. The present position is as follows:
 - a de facto suspension of IRA violence in Northern Ireland, but not in Britain or on the continent. The suspension is likely to last at least until the Northern Ireland local elections on 22 May, and perhaps the Irish election (6 June?). The IRA look unlikely to turn this into a real ceasefire without what they can present as movement in their direction from HMG. Meanwhile active IRA preparation for further attacks here, which could be more serious than the latest disruption, goes on.
 - the talks, due to resume on 3 June, are stuck, essentially on decommissioning of illegal arms. The Unionists want at least some decommissioning up front. We want decommissioning in parallel to talks, and Sinn Fein (with Irish/SDLP support) say any decommissioning before a settlement is in practice impossible. Very hard to square this circle.

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

- 2 -

- the marching season approaches, with the threat of more trouble at Drumcree. Your decision on whether the Independent Parades Commission will have decision-making powers, and when, is much awaited.
- 3. It is hard to get away from the problem of Sinn Fein. They have been asking for some months for a "date certain" for their entry into talks in the event of a credible ceasefire, as well as assurances about eg decommissioning not blocking the negotiations and a timetable for talks. The real intentions of the IRA/Sinn Fein are key but are, as always, hard to read.

THIS IS A COPY. THE ORIGINAL IS
RETAINED UNDER SECTION 3 (4)
OF THE PUBLIC RECORDS ACT

Whatever the exact ~~balance of power~~, there is little chance of the republican movement, obsessed with unity, moving away from a dual strategy of violence and politics for the foreseeable future. So any new ceasefire will be tactical, not permanent.

- 4. The key question is whether it is worth proactively trying to draw the IRA into a new ceasefire, in the hope that it can be made permanent by Sinn Fein's real engagement in politics. The Irish and Hume (and the Northern Ireland Office) argue strongly that it is. But the Unionists have more or less decided that Sinn Fein is irredeemable, and effectively letting Sinn Fein into the talks will almost certainly drive them out – at least for the time being. The truth is that it will be hard to retain good relations with the Unionists while moving in this direction – it is difficult to find specific carrots to offer them other than assurances that they are absolutely safe behind the consent principle.

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

- 3 -

Options

(i) Tell the IRA that they must just declare a genuine ceasefire, or continue to exclude themselves – there can be no bargaining about entry dates or anything else, but you want them in, and will respond positively and rapidly to a new ceasefire. Effectively the previous Government's stance.

Pros: simple; reassuring to Unionists.

Cons: nothing new; may lead to increased violence in the short term; will disappoint the Irish, Hume, Sinn Fein and the Americans.

(ii) As above but with a public or private deadline by which Sinn Fein must declare a ceasefire, or see the process move on without them more definitively than before. Co-opt the Irish and Americans to this if possible. Could be combined with the offer of a date for entry to talks, assuming a satisfactory ceasefire.

Pros

- A new move. Appears reasonable to face Sinn Fein with this choice. Builds on general disillusion with IRA/Sinn Fein hypocrisy. Could produce a ceasefire reasonably soon.

Cons

- The carrot for Sinn Fein of entry into talks will run into Unionist opposition (who will press for Sinn Fein to be ruled out indefinitely if they miss the boat).

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

- 4 -

- Setting a date for entry to talks puts the pressure on us to let them in when we have said, rather than on them to behave well enough to qualify.
 - Difficult to run if Irish won't bite.
 - If a ceasefire doesn't follow, the problem doesn't go away. Whatever they say, the Irish and SDLP will not in practice negotiate seriously without Sinn Fein, particularly after the Westminster election result (much better for Sinn Fein than the SDLP). And even the Unionists know that a settlement without Sinn Fein will probably not stick.
- (iii) Get into direct contact (which cannot be, or at least stay, secret) with Sinn Fein, eg through NIO officials. Adams has already asked for this in his message of congratulations to you. What would follow a ceasefire can then at least be discussed.

Pros

A lot to be said for avoiding reliance on dubious intermediaries like Hume.

Cons

Establishing direct contact in the absence of a ceasefire is obviously controversial. Unionists will criticise for negotiating the terms of a ceasefire and running after terrorists.

- (iv) Put the focus on the talks rather than Sinn Fein, making a fresh imaginative effort to break the deadlock over decommissioning (eg by putting more emphasis on consent as the key test for Sinn Fein).

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

- 5 -

Pros

If progress could be made, it would be an added incentive to draw Sinn Fein into a ceasefire. Would meet a key Unionist concern.

Cons

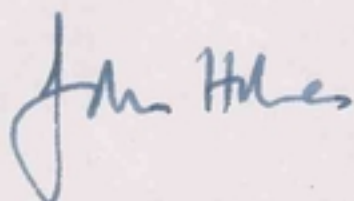
Nationalists would dislike because they believe the talks can't really move forward. Unionists are hung up on decommissioning, and will see any move to downgrade it as a plot to get in Sinn Fein. The IRA/Sinn Fein would feel ignored and step up the violence, drawing in the loyalists fully.

Comment

These are only quick outline thoughts – the options can of course be combined in various ways. Whatever course is adopted, there is also an awkward choice about timing. There is a lot to be said for a quick move to achieve a ceasefire while the momentum is fresh, but the local elections in Northern Ireland on 21 May increase sensitivities for the moment, and starting off by alienating the Unionists is not what you want.

You will gather that an important black hole is what to offer the Unionists to keep them sweet and prevent them over-reacting to any government move on Sinn Fein. Delayed implementation of the Parades Commission powers may be one possibility. Clearer Irish readiness to drop their constitutional claim to Northern Ireland might be another. Private assurances to Trimble may also help (but it is dangerous to raise his expectations). The NIO are also thinking hard about this.

JOHN HOLMES



CONFIDENTIAL