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COPY

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Private Secretary to the Prime Minister  
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LONDON SW1

23 May 1997

**SINN FEIN: A POSSIBLE TEXT**

Thank you for your letter of 20 May. As you will have seen from the note of the meeting, officials followed the broad approach endorsed by the Prime Minister.

Although they could have been striking a deliberate pose, officials gained the impression that Sinn Fein were serious about wanting to be included in negotiations and understood the need to establish first a genuine and unequivocal ceasefire. Providing Sinn Fein thought the Government were also serious then, if reassurances could be offered on the four issues they raised, there seemed a possibility of a ceasefire. Although there was little movement in substance on Sinn Fein's position on these issues, officials gained the impression that there was underlying flexibility and that any gap could in principle be bridged.

If reassurances are to be given as a prelude to a renewed ceasefire, then these will have to be written down. If they are written down, they will have to be published. We agree with you that, despite the difficulties, this is worth it if the prize of a satisfactory ceasefire can be achieved without sacrifice of principle.

The attached first draft of a possible text sets out to achieve just this. It has to strike a balance between:

- offering reasonable assurances on Sinn Fein's issues;

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- remaining faithful to underlying principles of policy including those set out in agreements with the Irish Government;
- remaining consistent with the legal position which governs the requirements for Sinn Fein's entry to negotiations;
- exposing as little flank as possible for unionists and others to claim there has been a departure from previous policy.

It therefore deliberately uses a good deal of established language which it is consequently harder for others to criticise.

It might seem attractive at first sight to have a simpler text with less hallowed language. But my Secretary of State believes a text of this kind is the right approach, partly because a number of the new positions involve small but significant shifts which can only be conveyed in context. For example, the idea that there should be Ministerial meetings with Sinn Fein after a ceasefire declaration, but before they join the talks process, is not new. But making it explicit that these would be in Castle Buildings is new. Irish officials detected hints that this could be important to Sinn Fein.

Secondly, the alignment of the text with earlier ones, such as the previous Government's statement of 28 November, renders it much less open to attack. We also have to take seriously the risk of judicial review if we depart from the statutory requirements.

My Secretary of State believes that this is the sort of text we shall need to think of deploying in public as a prelude to a further IRA ceasefire. If so, it will need to form part of a common understanding as to events leading up to and following a ceasefire and will consequently need to be shown to Sinn Fein in advance. We shall also want to gather the support of the Irish and US Governments by sharing this text with them in advance

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as well. Both Sinn Fein and the Irish Government can be expected to offer comments on it, which we may wish to take into account.

My Secretary of State would therefore like officials in the coming meetings with the Irish officials (Tuesday) and Sinn Fein (most likely, Wednesday) next week to draw on the language and concepts in this text. But they will not deploy it as a text without her express approval.

A copy goes to William Ehrman, FCO, and Jan Polley, Cabinet Office.

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