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From the Private Secretary

23 May 1997

SUBJECT  
MASTER

Dear Men,

Filed on:

**NORTHERN IRELAND: MEETING WITH THE TAOISEACH,  
23 MAY**

The Prime Minister had a short bilateral meeting with the Taoiseach in the margins of the Informal European Council. The Taoiseach was accompanied by the Taniste, Paddy Teahon, Sean O'hUiginn and Shane Kenny. Teahon and O'hUiginn had presumably come specially for the meeting. Jonathan Powell and I were there on our side.

Bruton said that he was grateful for the initiatives the Prime Minister had taken since they last met. Things were moving. Irish meetings with Sinn Fein suggested they were serious, although he himself was always sceptical about Sinn Fein's intentions. There were four points of concern to Sinn Fein.

On **confidence-building measures**, they were looking for some practical reassurance. On **decommissioning**, the Irish side had promised to make some suggestions to us. They would base themselves on the Mitchell Report but try to present this in a new enough way for others to buy into it. On the **time-frame**, the British legislation already provided for the talks to finish in May. That could well be sufficient. The period of time Sinn Fein had to wait for **entry into talks** could be the most difficult issue. Clearly some time was needed between a ceasefire and entry, but Sinn Fein wanted at least an indicative period, perhaps four weeks or less. This would be subject to their meeting what was required of them under the ground rules.

Bruton repeated that he did not know how genuine Sinn Fein were, and how fully the leadership had the movement with them. It was clear that the grass roots had not been with the leadership for the last ceasefire. But it was worth testing Sinn Fein to find out where they really stood.

The Prime Minister said that he was sorry if his speech had taken the Irish

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a little by surprise, but at the last meeting he had still been thinking through how to move forward. He was keen to get Sinn Fein into the process to establish whether they were genuine or not. Being in the talks would put them to the test. He was telling the Unionists that this would not be easy for Sinn Fein. If they failed the test, we would know that we had to move on without them. He would be looking to the Irish and John Hume to help in those circumstances. His strategy was to leave Sinn Fein with no vestiges of an excuse for not giving up violence. If they were not prepared to negotiate, so be it. If they could be brought into the talks, he wanted to crack on with a detailed agreement.

The Prime Minister continued that there seemed to be agreement on the basic elements of the settlement: some form of devolution, and some form of cross-border co-operation. People were free to advocate a united Ireland, but he did not think this was realistic himself.

Bruton said that there was a need to achieve a break-through on the decommissioning issue. Meanwhile he was worried that the SDLP position was being eaten away by Sinn Fein. There was a danger that recent events were giving Sinn Fein a profile which would help them to become larger than the SDLP. The Prime Minister agreed that this was a danger. But their local election vote was roughly the same as that in the last General Election. He had felt the need to act quickly to stop the situation on the ground deteriorating. He wanted Sinn Fein to have no possible grievances, and to face them with the hard choices. If the talks could get underway in earnest, whoever wrecked them would have a heavy price to pay.

Spring asked how Trimble was reacting. The Prime Minister said that his position was not easy, with the constant danger of being out-flanked on the right. Trimble liked the idea of himself and Hume being the engines of progress in the talks. But the Unionists did need constant reassurance that they were not going to be pushed into arrangements they could not live with.

Bruton raised in conclusion the proposed statement on East/West links. He suggested it be labelled the Noordwijk Declaration (!). It was agreed that it should be issued as drafted.

### Comment

There was not much substance to these exchanges, but my impression is that our aim of smoothing ruffled Irish feathers was achieved, not least by the photograph of a smiling trio at the beginning. Paddy Teahon certainly seemed satisfied afterwards.

On the substance, Teahon told me afterwards that the "four weeks or less" idea was Bruton's, not Sinn Fein's. I said that it struck me in any case as a good deal too short. This seemed to shock him, and he launched into a frantic lecture

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about the unacceptability of any long period to Sinn Fein. Surely we could get them in by the end of June in some way. Otherwise, the marching season would pose all kinds of problems, and the IRA hard men would seize their chance to wreck a ceasefire. Adams would be "hung out to dry". Teahon made clear he assumed no ceasefire would come until after Irish elections.

I said that we had taken absolutely no decisions on a date or a time frame. But I had to repeat that I thought expectations of a very short period were misplaced. There would of course be the possibility of using adjournments of the talks creatively.

I am copying this to William Ehrman (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), Jan Polley (Cabinet Office) and Veronica Sutherland in Dublin.

*Yours ae*

*John*

JOHN HOLMES

Ken Lindsay Esq  
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