

RESTRICTED

152703
MDADAN 0517

RESTRICTED

FM DUBLIN

TO IMMEDIATE FCO

TELNO 158

OF 190856Z MAY 97

INFO IMMEDIATE NIO(L), NIO(B), SNUFFBOX, WHIRL, WASHINGTON

SUBJECT: REACTIONS TO BLAIR SPEECH

SUMMARY

1. Universally favourable reaction to Prime Minister's Belfast speech.

DETAIL

2. The Prime Minister's speech in Belfast on 16 May has received a universally favourable reaction from political leaders and media commentators here. Reactions have concentrated on the offer of official-level talks with Sinn Fein, which is widely seen as opening the door to political progress, if only Sinn Fein will seize the opportunity.

3. The Taoiseach, Mr Bruton, in a press statement on 16 May, (by Fax to NIO/RID) welcomed the Prime Minister's emphasis on the principle of consent and his commitment to a settlement commanding the support of both nationalists and unionists. He agreed with the Prime Minister that, while it was desirable to have Sinn Fein on the "settlement train", the train would be leaving anyway. Mr Spring also welcomed the speech, urging the importance of grasping quote the precious opportunity for political progress unquote. Mr Ahern, while welcoming the speech, sought to make political capital by contrasting the Prime Minister's offer to Sinn Fein with the Irish Government's reluctance to meet them. The Government quickly countered by announcing that officials met Sinn Fein on 17 May, a meeting which they asserted had been authorised before the Prime Minister's speech.

4. Press comment has also been favourable with attention focussed predominantly on the offer to Sinn Fein. The Irish Times, in an editorial on 17 May, praised the Prime Minister's "determination and good judgement". He had made a "generous gesture" to Sinn Fein and it was now up to them to "seize the moment". The Irish Independent commended his "praiseworthy despatch" in fulfilling his

RESTRICTED

152703
MDADA 517

pledge to put Northern Ireland at the top of his agenda. "Sinn Fein are dealing with a man who knows what he is doing and where he is going." They should "take his offer and get on the train." The Sunday Independent on 18 May said it was time to call Sinn Fein's bluff. The only impediment to their inclusion in the talks was their own failure to persuade the IRA to abandon violence.

5. Most commentators note the pro-union sentiments in the speech and the view that Irish unity will not occur in the foreseeable future without adverse comment, many accepting that this is the logical outcome of the principle of consent. Neither is there criticism of the suggestion that the Irish Government should consider amending Articles 2 and 3 as a confidence-building measure in advance of a settlement.

COMMENT

6. Following the initial suspicious reaction by officials at the Anglo/Irish Liaison Group on Friday, the mood outlined above is encouraging. Teahon (Taoiseach's Department) told me on Friday that the Taoiseach had been personally extremely enthusiastic when he heard the speech, and had overruled O'hUiginns's (DFA) advice to respond coolly. The Taoiseach clearly shares the general perception that a decisive step has been taken to try and move the peace process forwards.

7. ADVANCE COPIES TO: Holmes, No.10, Budd, Cabinet Office, Thomas, NIO, Lamont, RID.

SUTHERLAND

YYYY

DISTRIBUTION

13

ADVANCE 13

.NORTHERN IRELAND
PS
PS/PUS
RID//HD
NEWS D//HD
PS/PM
NO.10//HOLMES

CAOFF1//PS/SEC/HD OD
CAOFF2//ASS STAFF/MR BUDD
NIO//SIR J CHILCOT
NIO//PS/S OF S
NIO//PS/MR A INGRAM
NIO//MR THOMAS
NIO//MS BHARUCHA

PAGE 2
RESTRICTED

WNNN