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No. 5353 P. 1/6
NO. 394 P001

From: THE PRIVATE SECRETARY
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See letter out

(1) a.m.

(2) File

John 20/5.

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John Holmes Esq
Private Secretary to the Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
LONDON
SW1A 2AA

20 May 1997

JP

+ back to

John 20/5.

Dear John,

Thank you for your letter of 18 May.

You asked a number of questions about the next steps, focusing in particular on the forthcoming meeting between officials and Sinn Féin. My Secretary of State agrees that not all of these questions are answerable or indeed need answering just yet.

On the meeting with Sinn Féin, the instructions which the Secretary of State has given have the effect that:

- After the necessary preliminaries establishing the purpose and context of the meeting, officials will seek to establish the agenda.
- Experience, press briefing by Sinn Féin, and their meeting with the Irish side, suggest that from Sinn Féin's perspective this will focus on the four unresolved issues: timing and certainty of entry to the process;

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decommissioning; time frame for the process;
and confidence building measures.

- If that is the agenda officials will seek to pin down Sinn Féin on the three issues other than the date. They will convey the impression that if these can be satisfactorily resolved then it would in principle be possible to contemplate movement on the date.
- On confidence building measures officials will rest on existing text, but take note of any additional concerns of Sinn Féin.
- On decommissioning officials will probe the extent of any gap. The solution is likely to turn on a form of words which will, of course, need to be consistent with the Mitchell Report.
- On time frame, officials might begin to signal that the Government does not expect the current talks process to be extended beyond May 1998 - the date indicated by the Northern Ireland (Entry to Negotiations etc) Act.
- Officials will not deploy a formula on the date at the first meeting. They will reaffirm that some period after a ceasefire declaration is

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needed in which words and deeds can be assessed. They may make clear that the judgement on this will be for the Secretary of State who will make "a political judgement of all the circumstances in the round". They may explain that the length of this period will be affected by whether, before the ceasefire declaration, there has been a period in which there has been an undeclared ceasefire and its duration.

- On the number of meetings, officials will be ready in principle to continue meeting, subject to events on the ground, while useful work is being done. They will be wary of being drawn in to an extended and purposeless series of meetings, or of conveying any impression that they for their part are seeking to drag things out.
- They will emphasise that the language of any ceasefire declaration, will be very significant and that any emphasis on adherence to and application of the six Mitchell principles would be helpful.

The Secretary of State believes it likely that Sinn Féin will seek to see any clarification which is established

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in this dialogue expressed in a text. If so officials will be ready, without commitment, to begin work on the necessary textual formulations. (Sean O hUiginn has told Quentin Thomas that Sinn Féin will be looking above all for signs of engagement from HMG.) She regards this as a benign outcome: a text will focus the discussions and avoid misunderstandings. A fresh text could help both sides avoid sterile questions as to whether Sinn Féin have compromised on their 10 October text or HMG on the 28 November text.

My Secretary of State emphasises that we shall be alert to the case for securing beneficial Irish and American pressure at the right moment. Her own forthcoming visit to Washington will provide a useful opportunity to influence American attitudes. Similarly my Secretary of State is fully alive to the need to manage Unionist and other opinions. The form in which a date is given, if and when it is, will be such as to be consistent with the Government's principles and the statutory requirements. She has noted your concern that a date may be given without much specific being received from Sinn Féin. Her answer to this is that we hope in exchange to secure a ceasefire, which is an end in itself, or, failing that, to wrongfoot the Republican movement by demonstrating that every reasonable step has been taken to allow them to enter the political process.

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She shares the concern that we should do all we can to keep the UUP in the process but recalls that the current approach was embarked on in full knowledge that there might be a period of turbulence in which the UUP is, we hope only temporarily, lost to the process.

On the verification of the genuineness of any ceasefire, my Secretary of State believes we should emphasise that this will be a matter for her political judgement of all the circumstances in the round. She sees particular risks in emphasising, as has sometimes been done in the past, the role that security and intelligence agencies may play in this.

Talks

My Secretary of State is clear that the talks should resume on 3 June as was agreed by all the participants. It is likely, in her view, that HMG will not wish to take the initiative in seeking an adjournment. If it seems sensible, one approach will be, at the right time, to invite Senator Mitchell to take soundings on the desirability of an adjournment. She believes that there are two circumstances which may produce a case for an adjournment: the first that following an Irish General Election there may be a period while a new Government is established, most obviously if it involves a different coalition of parties; the second is if there has been a

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recent ceasefire declaration or if otherwise continuing exchanges with Sinn Féin have the effect of so mesmerising the participants that no useful work can be done until the issue of Sinn Féin's possible entry in the process is resolved.

On decommissioning, my Secretary of State says that we are urgently seeking a procedural way through, initially with the Irish side through the Liaison Group (which met last Friday and is due to meet again on 27 May to consider a paper the Irish side has offered in response to one from the British side). If this work bears fruit, my Secretary of State will hope to meet Mr Spring to discuss this and related tactical issues before the resumption of the talks on 3 June.

Like you I am copying this letter to William Ehrman - FCO, Jan Polley - Cabinet Office, Sir John Kerr - Washington and Veronica Sutherland - Dublin.

Yours ever,

Ken

W K LINDSAY

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