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10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA

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From the Private Secretary

18 May 1997

Dear Gen,

NORTHERN IRELAND SPEECH

SUBJECT
MASTER

Filed on:

It may be useful, if only for the record, to report some of the conversations surrounding last Friday's speech, and to set out some of the obvious questions which now arise.

The afternoon before the speech, the Prime Minister spoke to his predecessor and gave him a broad outline of his plans and what he proposed to say. Mr Major thought an early visit was right and that the content of the speech also struck the right balance, although he warned against over-reassuring the Unionists.

Early on Friday morning, the Prime Minister also spoke to David Trimble and John Hume, giving both a rough outline of what he was going to say. To Trimble, he stressed that he was setting out to reassure Unionist opinion, as they had discussed but, as they had also touched on, wanted to give Sinn Fein one more opportunity to get themselves into the talks. Trimble reacted well, but did not say much at the time. To Hume the Prime Minister underlined the importance of the new opportunity being offered to Sinn Fein but made clear that, if they did not take it, he would be looking to Hume to move on without them.

Meanwhile, I had briefed both Paddy Teahon and Sandy Berger late on Thursday evening, and urged both to react constructively but without euphoria (just in case they felt any). Both were cautious, and clearly wanted to see the words first, but undertook to do their best.

After the speech, and the generally positive reactions it received, not least from Trimble and Hume, I rang both the latter to express the Prime Minister's thanks. Trimble said he thought the speech had been good and contained a reasonable balance. But he added that there was obvious concern about the

CONFIDENTIAL

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CONFIDENTIAL

- 2 -

planned meetings with Sinn Fein. He hoped this would not turn out to be a slippery slope, and would want to be in touch with the Prime Minister again before long.

Hume was very positive, as he had been in public. He said that he had already been in touch with Adams to tell him to focus on the overall balance of the speech, and particularly the points about a political settlement. Adams had made clear that Sinn Fein would be taking up the invitation. They would want in particular to know where we stood on the draft statement of 10 October. I said that I hoped there would be no going back to the idea of us having to make such a statement. Life had moved on. Hume backtracked. What was important was not whether we made the statement itself but whether the principles contained in it gave us any difficulty. He did not see how they could.

I have recorded separately my exchanges with Teahon about the speech on Sunday. I will speak today to Berger to thank him for the US reaction, which struck me as just right. Meanwhile the meeting with Sinn Fein has now been set up for Wednesday. I am recording separately what Teahon told me about the Irish officials' meeting with them on Saturday. But it may be helpful to set out some of the immediate questions we have to face, with apologies for stating the obvious in some areas.

- (i) How to play Sinn Fein: how many meetings do we envisage, and at what stage would we play the date card, assuming they are giving us enough to want to play it? What date would we set? Can we get away from the sterile game of Sinn Fein demanding public statements from us, and getting into negotiations about words? What are we actually expecting from them – how far can we press them on the language of a ceasefire declaration, especially if we want to avoid negotiating about statements ourselves? How can we best use the Irish and, especially, the Americans in all this (including Clinton's visit);
- (ii) How to manage Unionist and other opinion: how will we justify giving a date if we do, especially if we have got nothing much specific out of Sinn Fein, as is likely? How can we prevent the UUP saying in advance that they won't be in the talks if Sinn Fein are? What are we going to say about verification of the genuineness of any ceasefire?

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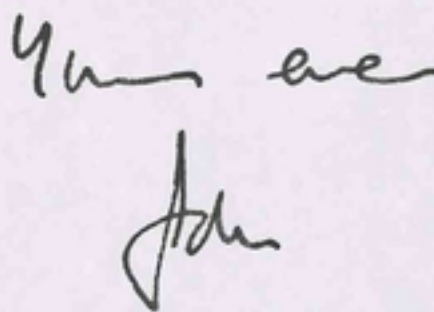
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- 3 -

- (iii) The talks: do we resume on 3 June, or would it be better to use the Irish elections as an excuse to delay (not popular with Unionists, presumably)? Could we for example delay the restart until end-June, thus giving us only about a month to get through before August, and perhaps a latish Autumn restart when Sinn Fein might be there? Isn't this going to look very contrived and "waiting for Sinn Fein"-like?
- (iv) Decommissioning (closely related to iii): Is there really a chance of a procedural way through, particularly if the Unionists begin to expect Sinn Fein to be there? Is there a chance of moving away from focus on decommissioning, eg transferring the onus onto consent, without creating a new precondition for Sinn Fein and causing the Unionists to shout betrayal?

I have no clear answers to these questions. Nor do I expect you to have all the answers. But we do need very rapid advice on (i), before the meeting with Sinn Fein. We must have a clear game plan before we start talking. They will certainly have one.

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



JOHN HOLMES

Ken Lindsay Esq
Northern Ireland Office

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