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From the Private Secretary

18 May 1997

Dear Ken,

CONTACTS WITH SINN FEIN

Paddy Teahon rang me on Sunday to give me a read-out of the Irish officials' meeting with Sinn Fein the previous day. He, Sean O'hUiginn and Tim Dalton had met Gerry Adams and Pat Doherty. (Teahon told me incidentally that the Irish were a bit fed up that some of their media were saying that they had just been copying us when, as we knew, their meeting had been arranged before the Prime Minister's speech.)

The essential message from Adams had been that, if they got reasonable assurances from HMG on the four points below, there could be a ceasefire within 7 - 10 days. This was not the same line as Sinn Fein were taking in public, but it was very clear from both Adams and Doherty that a new ceasefire was on.

The four points were pretty familiar:

- (i) Confidence-building: prisoners, policing, emergency legislation, equality, democratic rights, etc.
- (ii) A timeframe for negotiations: Sinn Fein continue to have 6-9 months in mind. The Irish pointed out that the talks would in any case only have one more year to run under the UK legislation.
- (iii) Decommissioning: Sinn Fein gave the impression that if we could find a way to move forward on the kind of basis discussed before the talks adjourned, and more recently at the Liaison Group, they might be able to live with this. Adams talked of being "pragmatic" on the issue.
- (iv) Sinn Fein's entry into talks: the Sinn Fein position had hardened up. They insisted on equal treatment with the other parties and therefore on full participation in the talks as soon as a ceasefire was declared. Equality of treatment, on the basis of their electoral mandate, was a much-repeated mantra.

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The Irish view after the meeting was that, if Sinn Fin were reasonably satisfied on the first three points, there should be some room for manoeuvre on the fourth, in terms of arranging the "choreography" to suit both sides. But it was clear that this would be the hardest area in which to agree, as it had been in the past.

I said that Sinn Fein still seemed to be in the mode of demanding concessions from us to make a ceasefire possible. This was bound to be difficult. I hoped we were not going to go round the houses over a new statement we had to make. Teahon said that the 10 October statement had not been mentioned at all, and their impression was that assurances in the official talks would be enough for Sinn Fein, without the need for public statements.

Teahon added that Adams had appeared ready to do business and relatively pragmatic. Sinn Fein had apparently expressed the hope that we would be ready to engage quickly, rather than repeating well-known positions at each other (as Adams had admitted had been the case during the last ceasefire). I said that we would certainly be serious, but I hoped Sinn Fein did not imagine all could be sorted out at one meeting.

Quentin Thomas will no doubt be in touch with Sean O'hUiginn to cross-check this account - Teahon is often prone to wishful thinking and is usually vague on details. On the face of it, the Sinn Fein approach sounds reasonably encouraging, but timing looks like being very difficult. I have asked separately for the earliest possible advice on the line we should take.

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



JOHN HOLMES

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