

CONFIDENTIAL



10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA

From the Private Secretary

21 June 1997

Dear Han,

DENVER: NORTHERN IRELAND

It may be useful to record the main contacts in the course of today. I met Berger and Steinberg early this morning to discuss handling of the bilateral between the Prime Minister and President Clinton. We were keen for the two to speak to the press together at some point to reinforce the unity of their approach, and keep up the pressure on Sinn Fein. Berger and Steinberg were wary. They said that Adams's letter to the Prime Minister had been seen by various people in the Irish-American community, as well as by the Administration. The reaction had been the same on all sides. It was unacceptable and an obvious attempt to prevaricate. This had been made clear to Adams. He had clearly got the message, and had backtracked quickly to say that nearly all the points he had raised were in fact only "minor housekeeping details", which could be sorted out rapidly in any kind of conversation. The only substantive point was decommissioning, where Sinn Fein really needed to know the position.

Steinberg had just talked to Adams and given him a tough message. His letter was not seen by the Administration as the forthcoming response to our approach which was needed. Adams needed to make clear that this was not his response. Time was running out for Sinn Fein. They had their best ever chance to get into the talks and should not miss it. The President was telling them to produce a forthcoming response. Adams had said that the Administration should understand, on the Lurgan murders, that the IRA had not been aware of the progress that had been made. He was not excusing what they had done, but they had not been in the loop. On the letter itself, he had repeated what he had said to his Irish-American contacts. Steinberg said that it was no good saying these things to the Americans. They should say them to us, through whatever channels were appropriate. Adams said that he would get McGuinness to ring Quentin Thomas.

CONFIDENTIAL

(1)

CONFIDENTIAL

- 2 -

(I tried to warn Quentin about this, and spoke to Jonathan Stephens.)

Berger said that in the light of this, and the evident disarray of Sinn Fein over the response to their letter, he hoped that we would not go too public too soon on the details of what we had given Sinn Fein. There was still a chance of a positive response, and putting them too publicly in the corner could ruin this chance.

I said that we were not in the business of making it impossible for them to move, or withdrawing what we had said. But we had been disgusted by the Lurgan murders, and by the Adams letter. We wanted to maximise the pressure on Sinn Fein, and capitalise on the revulsion inspired by the Lurgan attacks. That was why we wanted the Prime Minister and President to appear together.

This discussion was continued when the Prime Minister and President met briefly in the margins of the summit to talk about Northern Ireland. Clinton said that he wanted to help. He had been appalled by the Lurgan murders in cold blood, and livid at the Adams letter. But Sinn Fein were obviously now running around trying to recover the position, and he did not want to close things off for them too early. Another 48 hours might provide a better response. He had been astonished by the strength of feeling in the Irish-American community since last Monday. Sinn Fein were in danger of sacrificing all their support.

The Prime Minister explained again that we were not trying to keep Sinn Fein out, but to get them in. If they were not willing to come in, we would obviously have to go on without them, but that was not our preference. It was agreed after some discussion that the basic message to the press should be that President Clinton had been impressed by the approach taken by the new government and believed there was a real opportunity to make progress. The ball was now in Sinn Fein's court.

The Prime Minister and President duly spoke to the press on these lines.

I subsequently spoke to John Hume twice. On the first occasion, I brought him up to speed with reactions to the Adams' letter. He seemed surprised at first, but quickly recovered and claimed that he had warned Adams that the letter would not do. He subsequently rang me back, having spoken to Adams again. Adams had given him the same message as he had given the Americans: only decommissioning was a serious point; the rest were details that could easily be cleared up. Hume said that he would be meeting Adams again on Sunday, and would report back after that. I said that he should relay the message to Adams that he should not expect further clarification from us. We had made our position clear.

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

- 3 -

Many of the points raised by Adams concerned future policy, which we were not going to answer now. On decommissioning, we had nothing to add. Discussions were going on between the two governments. This prompted a diatribe from Hume about the irrelevance of decommissioning. But he said at the end of it that Adams had expressed interest in seeing what the two governments came up with.

We have not so far sent any written reply to Hume. It is not clear that one is now needed, given the exchanges there have been.

Finally, after the meeting with Clinton, I tried to ring Trimble to brief him, and to calm him down, having received a message via No.10 that he was upset about the way the story was coming out in Britain. When he finally came through, he spoke to the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister explained what he had been saying to Clinton, and the way he was trying to exploit the real change in US opinion. Trimble was worried about journalists in Denver not understanding the details, and getting it wrong. The Prime Minister said that we were trying to ensure that the story came out in a balanced way. He looked forward to seeing Trimble on Tuesday to discuss the way forward, and what he should say in his statement on Wednesday.

I subsequently spoke to Trimble again to go through where things stood in more detail. I spelled out that we had given an aide memoire to Sinn Fein on the Friday before the Lurgan murders, and went through briefly the main points, including our suggestion that if there was a ceasefire which we judged satisfactory in word and deed, Sinn Fein would be invited to a plenary session some six weeks later to swear their allegiance to the Mitchell principles. Thereafter they might be able to take part in substantive negotiations, which would presumably not get underway until September. I added that, following events in Lurgan, we would obviously take more convincing about the satisfactory nature of a ceasefire.

Trimble took all this calmly, and as if he either knew or expected it all already. His main concern remained how this was being presented publicly. We should now keep quiet for a period, and save the details for the Prime Minister's statement to Parliament. Otherwise, it looked as if we were offering guaranteed entry to Sinn Fein, because journalists did not understand the nuances, and this put Unionists in difficulty. He was avoiding the media himself, but Ken Maginnis would have to say something on Sunday.

I pointed out that our strategy was to show that we had gone the extra mile to ensure that Sinn Fein had no excuses, and that others had no reason not to support us, however Sinn Fein responded. Trimble did not query this as a strategy, but said we should not oversell it in these terms, since this did not help presentationally in

CONFIDENTIAL

(3)

CONFIDENTIAL

- 4 -

Britain. I said that I took the point.

Comment

Subject to how all this comes out in the British press, I think we are not positioned too badly. Certainly we are well placed with the Americans, and presumably with the Irish, although they have been remarkably quiet. We will now have to wait to see whether there is any further response from Sinn Fein, given the pressure that has been put on them. The Prime Minister is determined to press on with political progress, whatever Sinn Fein say, and will want to make this clear in his planned statement on Wednesday (if that is the day chosen in the end).

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

Yours ever
John

JOHN HOLMES

Ken Lindsay, Esq.,
Northern Ireland Office.

CONFIDENTIAL

(4)