

CONFIDENTIAL



10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA

SUBJECT
MASTER

Filed on:
24 June 1997

From the Private Secretary

See Ken,

MEETING WITH HUME, 24 JUNE

The Prime Minister met Hume for 30 minutes this afternoon. Hume was alone (and claimed that he had been told that the meeting was to be private, which I do not think we had ever said). Jonathan Powell, Alastair Campbell and I were there on our side.

The Prime Minister said that we had reached a crucial stage. We now had agreement between the two governments on decommissioning. The UUP did not like it, but we had to hold to it. So everything was now in place. But he was increasingly worried that we would not be able to hold the Unionists in, and perhaps the Opposition. He would be saying in his statement that we wanted substantive talks to get under way. He would explain the background to the aide memoire, and make clear that it was not off the table, although the killings had been dreadful. He would also make clear that we wanted to get on with the settlement process, and that for the rest, the ball was in Sinn Fein's court. The Americans and Irish were strongly supportive at present. He hoped Hume also would say that the right conditions were there for a ceasefire, and if one was not declared, it was time to get on without Sinn Fein.

Hume said that he appreciated the priority the Prime Minister had given the issue. He thought we were near to achieving the breakthrough. He had told Adams that, in his opinion, our aide memoire covered the basic points. There was a distrust factor, stemming from the previous Government, but this government had rebuilt it. Following the cancellation of a further meeting with Sinn Fein, he had asked Adams to write down his views. When he had done so, Hume had been horrified but had passed them on. Adams had explained to him later that decommissioning was the only serious point, and that the others were housekeeping details.

Hume continued that he had spoken to Adams again today to say that Sinn Fein's concerns about confidence building would be met by the proposed Sub-committee to be established as part of the decommissioning structure. It had also emerged that another meeting between Sinn Fein and officials, including oral assurances on their minor points of concern, should lead straight to a ceasefire.

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

- 2 -

Adams and McGuinness had said that, if there was such a meeting and it cleared up their concerns, they would go straight to the IRA. He knew a meeting was difficult. If it helped, he would suggest such a meeting himself in public, and say that he was convinced that such a meeting would lead to a ceasefire. He would even invite the participants to meet in his house.

The Prime Minister said that he was worried about being dragged into a further process of negotiations. He had gone as far as he could go. We were very close to losing the Unionists altogether. We had been told that decommissioning was the real problem, but more was still being asked of us. We would just be seen as making concessions to Sinn Fein under duress.

Hume said that it was not a question of negotiating. Sinn Fein just wanted oral clarification, for example on how prisoners would be dealt with in future. He had suggested himself that the incorporation of the ECHR in the UK law would deal with these issues. But he was convinced that a meeting, if it worked, would lead directly to a ceasefire. The prize was enormous, and it could calm down the situation on the ground. A large part of the movement wanted peace. We should not forget that there had been a ceasefire for 18 months, which the previous government had wasted. (There followed a digression on the history of the Downing Street Declaration.) The battle within republican ranks continued. In the past, every time they had stopped the violence, they had split. They wanted to avoid this.

The Prime Minister said that he could not agree to another meeting with officials. This would be indefensible in the House of Commons, and it would not help if such a meeting was in response to a suggestion from Hume. He worried about being strung along by Sinn Fein. It might be they did not want a ceasefire now, although they might want one later. Perhaps the hard men in the movement had taken the upper hand. It was difficult to know. But there was certainly no justification now for not calling a ceasefire.

There was then some discussion of the possibility of a further letter to Hume, in response to the Adams letter. The Prime Minister considered this, but said again that we were within an ace of losing Trimble and Hume's attitude was crucial to this. Perhaps they could agree instead on what Hume would say in the House after his statement tomorrow?

Hume said that he could welcome the priority the Prime Minister had given to the issue and the clear statement he had made, and go on to make clear that the conditions for a ceasefire were now there, including a clear procedure for dealing with decommissioning, and CBMs for both sections of the community.

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

- 3 -

The Prime Minister said that it was essential for Hume to add that, if there were not a ceasefire, he would join others in taking forward the process without Sinn Fein. Hume tried to change the subject, but the Prime Minister repeated that it was essential that Hume said this to keep Trimble on board. Hume said that he could refer to the need to continue to work to reach agreement, if there was no cessation of violence, and the need to put this agreement to the people in a referendum both north and south of the border. This prospect always scared the IRA. He added that he hoped the Prime Minister would not call again for the Irish to change their constitution in advance of a settlement.

The Prime Minister said he had no difficulty with this, not least because he thought there was no chance of it happening in reality. But it was essential Hume spoke on the lines he had suggested. Hume seemed to agree.

In conclusion, there was some discussion on what Hume should say to the media. We persuaded him to stick to generalities about the priority attached by the government to progress, and the opportunity now there to move forward. (We gave him a copy of the decommissioning proposals, on condition that he did not reveal that he had it.)

Comment

The message from the Prime Minister that he had gone as far as he could in clarifying things for Sinn Fein, and that Hume should say that he would join others without Sinn Fein if there was no ceasefire, could not have been clearer. Even Hume could not have failed to understand. Unfortunately, this does not mean that he will relay the first part faithfully to others, or act on the second when he speaks tomorrow. We shall see.

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


JOHN HOLMES

Ken Lindsay Esq
Northern Ireland Office

CONFIDENTIAL