

4. Jul. 1997 17:13

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Rees*

FROM: JONATHAN STEPHENS
Associate Political Director (L)
4 July 1997

PS/Secretary of State (L&B)

cc PS/Mr Murphy (L&B)
 PS/PUS (L&B)
 PS/Sir David Fell
 Mr Thomas
 Mr Bell
 Mr Ray
 Mr Watkins
 Mr Beeton
 Mr Brooker
 Mr Hill
 Mr Maccabe
 Mr Holmes, No 10
 Mr Budd, Cabinet Office
 Mr H Taylor, HO
 Mr Tebbit, FCO
 HMA, Dublin
 Mr Cary, Washington

RESPONSE TO McGUINNESS LETTER OF 2 JULY

I understand that the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister agreed that we should reply to this letter today or tomorrow. When McGuinness rang this afternoon, Mr Thomas told him he would get a reply and this might be today or, more likely, early next week.

Mechanics

2. I attach a draft reply. Because time is short, I am copying this direct to No 10.
3. Once Ministers are content that the draft is along the right lines, we should show it to both the Irish and US Governments before issuing it to Sinn Féin. Consultation with the Irish was agreed at Thursday's meeting: it is valuable in itself and binds the Irish Government in to any response we offer.
4. This points to:
 - agreeing a draft tonight and sending it at least to the Irish Government tonight asking for any very quick comments;

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- issuing the reply to Sinn Féin in the course of tomorrow.

5. I assume No 10 will consult the Irish Government down their channels.

Draft response

6. The draft largely speaks for itself. But some brief comments may be helpful.

7. The general approach is to take Sinn Féin's questions seriously. they represent genuine questions, not just a stalling device, and that Adams and McGuinness need to be able to point to some answers if they are to secure a ceasefire.

8. This leads to a longish reply, but Mr Trimble's own 8 page list of questions for clarification now establishes something of a benchmark.

9. The draft reply adopts the Irish advice not to deal with each question in turn but to concentrate on explaining our approach to the key issues of decommissioning and prisoners. Nevertheless, I have ensured that there is something in the draft which can be pointed to as an answer to each of Sinn Féin's questions, so that they cannot claim there are any left unanswered. (This explains, for example, the need for a quote demonstrating that Sinn Féin's claim that the Prime Minister has never mentioned the Framework Document is false.)

10. On decommissioning, the draft quotes extensively from the language of the joint proposals so as to avoid any claim by the Irish Government that we are departing from those. It also includes the crucial quote that both Governments are working to achieve due progress on decommissioning alongside progress in the political negotiations.

11. The draft makes it clear that the joint proposals offer no ready made levers with which unionists can block the negotiations, but also makes it clear that progress and a successful outcome requires the consent of both unionists and of nationalists, so the negotiations can in practice be blocked on any one of a number of crucial issues.

12. On prisoners, we have expanded the description of the Government's approach to include some positive, but vague, statements about treatment of prisoners and prisoners serving their sentences close to their families (this is in accordance with existing policy). Home Office officials are content for us also to mention that decisions on three repatriation cases are expected this month which gives some substance to otherwise general statements.

13. Of the other housekeeping issues, the draft makes it clear that Ministers will meet Sinn Féin after a ceasefire declaration. (The aide memoire said meetings would be possible but that was not intended to convey any uncertainty as to whether meetings

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PREM 49/111 letter from J Stephens dated 04/07/97

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would in fact happen - indeed, on Ministerial instructions, officials told Sinn Féin in the earlier meetings that this would be the case).

14. The draft also offers a commitment that meetings with the Prime Minister would be considered on the same basis as for other parties, but only after Sinn Féin have joined the negotiations and made their commitment to the Mitchell principles. The prospect of a meeting with the Prime Minister - but only after Sinn Féin have already entered negotiations - is a powerful card and worth playing in if possible, since Sinn Féin have asked about it.

(Signed JAS)

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