

SECRET - PERSONAL

From: John Holmes
Date: 6 June 1997

S 56 /97

PRIME MINISTER

cc: Jonathan Powell
Pat McFadden

NORTHERN IRELAND: NEXT STEPS

I attach Mo's latest paper. We have a meeting to discuss it with her early on Tuesday morning. You may like a chance to look at it over the weekend.

The proposed game plan has come a long way in our direction, in particular the proposed form of the article/speech in which the offer to Sinn Fein is to be made. I think this is now very much on the right lines, although we will need to crawl through it again. I find some of the NIO argumentation about why we should move now less than convincing, but I do not dispute the conclusion that, if we are going to do something, we should get on with it.

The part I still have difficulty with is the paper's recommendation that we should show the article/speech to the Americans, Irish and Sinn Fein ten days in advance of publishing it. The paper says that there is no question of negotiating the text, but showing it to others invites comments from them. If we then ignore the comments, we risk undoing any good will we may have gained by showing them the text, especially if the process is relatively leisurely. I accept that just publishing a text without warning would not be the best way of attracting support from any quarter. We will certainly need to prepare the ground. But I question the wisdom of doing so in the way suggested by the NIO. I also question whether another meeting with Sinn Fein to "go through the text with them" is

SECRET - PERSONAL

I note:

1) we shd discuss issues with S.P. & know what they want; but not negotiate next. I sd I wdnt do that & I shdnt.

2) Guade: shd it be a speech or a statement to House. An article is too pitiful.

3) If a speech, it shd contain alot more general re-assurance to the U.S. And a better intellectual framework.

4) The Irish & U.S. are critical to this. I possibly shd speak to Clinton early this week. I am v. worried about IRA activity

5) we shd lie up for after the speech, immediate support from U.S. Irish G., Hume, business community, & church leaders.

6) on Gweelis. I am easy. In effect nothing will happen until Sept. we wd present it as effectively that
7) we shd set next May as date for session

SECRET - PERSONAL

- 2 -

sensible, given that the fact of the meeting will not be easy to defend following the Poleglass bomb.

The other issue is the length of time between a ceasefire and Sinn Fein's entry into talks. Six weeks is shorter than we had in mind. But I find the NIO arguments about the relationship to the marching season and the adjournment of the talks quite convincing. One possibility would be to finesse the timing slightly by saying that Sinn Fein would be invited to join the talks as early as six weeks later, if all was well. This would be an incentive to good behaviour by leaving the possibility of a later invitation open, and might help a bit would the Unionists. But the wording would need to be right to prevent Sinn Fein from arguing that they were still being offered nothing definite.

We also need to look carefully at the timescale of action, and factor in your absences at Amsterdam and Denver. We do not want the fuss about any offer we make to happen while you are not around. This makes the timing awkward. There is an argument for moving faster than the NIO suggest, i.e. making your offer at the end of next week.

However these are, relatively speaking, points of detail which we can discuss. I think we are now close to a satisfactory strategy which will attract strong Irish and American support.

Further IRA activity would make it harder still to go through with what we want. Unfortunately, as material I have asked the Duty Clerk to show you on return to Downing Street on Sunday shows, this can by no means be ruled out. I have spoken to both the Irish and the Americans to make clear that renewed IRA

SECRET - PERSONAL

SECRET - PERSONAL

- 3 -

violence is in severe danger of derailing our efforts, and to urge them to ensure Sinn Fein understand this fully. I think both will take action accordingly.

Meanwhile efforts to agree with the Irish on an approach to decommissioning are continuing, and going reasonably well despite the Irish elections. With luck, we may have an agreed approach by late next week. This will help considerably to push Sinn Fein in the right direction, since at least they will know what they are likely to face when they come in to the talks (although this assumes that the two governments will succeed in selling our agreed approach to the SDLP and UUP, which may prove a big assumption).

You should incidentally telephone both the winner and the losers of the Irish elections, if Bertie Ahern wins, and the winners if John Bruton does. This may need to happen over the weekend if the results are clear in time. I will try to be in touch at an appropriate moment, although I am moving around myself over the weekend.



JOHN HOLMES

SECRET - PERSONAL