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6/6/97

cc FA/APS  
Pat McFadden  
Alastair Campbell

PRIME MINISTER

559

**NORTHERN IRELAND: THE NEXT STEPS**

1. I have reflected further on how we should take things forward, in the light of our meetings on Monday and Wednesday. We are to meet again on Tuesday.

Resumption of IRA attacks

2. However irrational it seems, the Poleglass bomb is consistent with what we know of the IRA's strategy to date. Until there is a declared ceasefire, the IRA will use both politics and terror to try to pressure us.

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5. So there is a range of possible explanations for what they are about:

- the IRA have written us off as no different to the previous Government;

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- they believe they can pressure us to make more concessions, using both political expressions of "disappointment" and bombs;
- they want to keep their options open over the marching season and wait until September for a possible ceasefire, so want to stall the talks in the meantime while blaming us;
- they see an opportunity for a ceasefire but need to present this, internally within their movement, as the result of a fierce struggle with the British Government in which we have been forced to climb down and offer concessions.

c. We do not know which of these explanations is closest to the truth. Which ever it is, I think the underlying analysis of the approach we have taken so far remains valid.

Part of our approach should be to give the leadership the arguments with which to convince the IRA. That is why the approach we make, while firm and clear, should avoid confrontation and challenge.

#### Our approach

We need to make progress in the talks. There is unlikely to be progress until it is clear whether Sinn Féin are in or out. So we must make a serious effort to get Sinn Féin in.

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PREM 49/110 Letter Lindsay to the PM dated 06/06/97



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Either this works and leads to a ceasefire. This would represent a significant step forward (despite undoubted unionist turbulence which may force us even to abandon this current process and set up an alternative in which they do not physically have to meet Sinn Féin). Or, if this approach is rejected, Sinn Féin are seen in the eyes of the Irish and US Governments and the SDLP to have spurned a reasonable offer. We can then put the Irish Government and the SDLP to the test namely, since Sinn Féin would have rejected a fair offer, would the SDLP and the Irish Government now agree to work purposively for a settlement in a process which left Sinn Féin behind? They have proved extremely reluctant to do so, blaming the Government in the past for setting impossible hurdles for Sinn Féin to jump.

I think the Poleglass bomb reinforces the arguments for moving decisively and quickly to put a firm offer to Sinn Féin now which will be seen as reasonable and fair by the Irish and US Governments and the SDLP.

*The NIO are brilliant at turning every event into an argument for movement towards Sinn Féin!*

I know there is uncertainty about whether the date we offer should be end-July or September. It would be a mistake to suggest we want anything other than an immediate ceasefire. That would appear to validate terrorist attacks in the meantime.

But an August ceasefire, when the talks will be adjourned anyway, leading to entry in mid-September may be the more realistic scenario. We should not rule this out - not least because we could be badly wrong-footed by doing so.

So I think the best approach would be:

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- to indicate we have in mind a period of about six weeks to assess a ceasefire;
- we want an immediate ceasefire, which would enable Sinn Féin to join the talks before the end of July;
- but, in any case, we want the talks to move to substantive negotiations in September, and this offer will not remain beyond then.

In short, we want Sinn Féin on the settlement train as soon as possible. But whether they are on or off, it will leave in September.

Six weeks is, I judge, a fair period. Sinn Féin want immediate entry. The Irish Government argue that it should be 4 weeks or less, claiming that longer periods tell us nothing more. Six weeks is the likely length of the summer adjournment. It also leaves open the possibility of Sinn Féin's entry at the end of July, so putting pressure on them to declare a ceasefire before the July marching season.

This approach would deny Sinn Féin the moral high ground. It would be likely to secure strong US and Irish backing, so maximising the pressure on Sinn Féin and the chances of moving forward without them if it were spurned. It would make it clear that the process of talks with Sinn Féin would not be drawn out and would not develop, as unionists fear, into negotiations. It would deny Sinn Féin the chance to blame us for delay.

By comparison, if we do nothing now to bring this to a head we let Sinn Féin's claims that we are at fault go unchecked and we heighten unionist concern that some open-ended process with Sinn Féin is underway. Any meetings we

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authorise would of course be publicly acknowledged but, even if none are held, unionists will suspect that some undisclosed contacts continue. A clear statement of our position now would demonstrate our commitment to openness and straight dealing.

Gameplan

So the gameplan I envisage is:

10/11 June

Send article/speech to US and Irish Governments (drafts to President and Taoiseach attached, to be supplemented by NIO contact with NSC and DFA) asking for their support, including for moving forward without Sinn Féin if they spurn the offer. (We should make it clear they are not to pass it on to Sinn Féin.)

By 13 June

Consider any comments/advice from both Governments with a view to maximising their support.

Send a copy to Sinn Féin making it clear the text is not for negotiation but offering one meeting to go through it, if they wish.

*Not clear what such a meeting would actually be for.*

Brief Trimble in detail on approach and the need to put to Sinn Féin what the Irish and US Governments and the SDLP see as a fair offer, so as to secure their support for moving forward anyway if Sinn Féin spurn it.

By 20 June

Finalise article/speech in our own terms.

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Take Trimble and Hume through text a day or two in advance, and briefing other NI political leaders shortly before delivery.

Deliver article/speech.

The key to our approach is marshalling support from the US and Irish Governments and the SDLP. It is for that reason that I still believe we should send any text to Sinn Féin in advance. Otherwise we run the risk that those whose support we want will think we are not giving the IRA leadership a serious chance to put a ceasefire in place. It may well be that either Government would show it to Sinn Féin anyway - but, if so, I believe it to be much better to claim the credit for direct dealing ourselves. ?

We would, of course, make it clear that there was no question of negotiating the text. We would, I suggest, offer one meeting - subject to events on the ground - to allow Sinn Féin to go through it, if they wished. But officials would be under instructions simply to take note of any concerns Sinn Féin had and not to negotiate on the text. This would also reassure unionists that the meetings with Sinn Féin are not open-ended. ?

Draft article/speech

Nigel Warner and Pat McFadden in No 10 have worked on the text. The attached version builds on their work and incorporates the approach to the date I have suggested.

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It is deliberately aimed at maximising support from the US and Irish Governments and moderate nationalists. So it sets out to address Sinn Féin's concerns directly and reasonably. It deliberately **avoids the approach of throwing down a challenge to the IRA**, which is less likely to be seen by those whose support we need as the right approach.

Unionists would undoubtedly prefer a tougher approach. But I believe we can explain to Trimble the need to put Sinn Féin to the test of whether they are prepared to enter negotiations - on a basis the other governments and the SDLP accept is reasonable, so that we can then have their support for moving forward without Sinn Féin if they spurn it. I attach a note outlining the selling points I would intend to deploy with unionists. We would of course need a proactive effect to ensure we secured wider support: including MPs on all sides, the press and the loyalist parties.

#### Conclusion

I believe we need to move quickly now and would be grateful to know that you are content to follow this gameplan.

A copy goes to Sir Robin Butler.

Approved by the Secretary of State

and signed in her absence

K Lindsay

for Marjorie Mowlam

6 June 1997

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