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From: John Holmes
Date: 9 October 1996

PRIME MINISTER *ple*

cc: Mr Allan
Mr Oakden

NORTHERN IRELAND

... You are meeting David Trimble later today. I attach a line to take with him. But a few wider reflections may be helpful, and explain the line I have suggested with Trimble.

The Lisburn attack, and PIRA's acknowledgement of it, suggest to me that there is now no prospect of another IRA ceasefire before the General Election (if there ever was). We should certainly work on that assumption. I am sure Hume will go on with his efforts, and that Sinn Fein will continue to tell Hume, and the Irish and American Governments, that a ceasefire is still available if we will just do/say this or that. We will still have to manage these approaches carefully to stay on the moral high ground. (Hume has been in touch with me again this morning to say he expects Adams' response soon, and to express continuing optimism.) But they have no credibility and we cannot take them seriously (even if the NIO still have lingering hopes).

This means two things:

- (i) we must make a really serious effort to get the talks moving without Sinn Fein, and make clear to all concerned that we are doing so. We should be careful not to slam the door on Sinn Fein for ever, for both propaganda and substantive reasons: after a period of further violence

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going nowhere, Sinn Fein will come round to wanting to get into negotiations again. We do not want self-imposed handicaps at that point. But we should strain every sinew to show that not only can the talks go on without them, but that they can make real progress on the substantive political issues. This means getting past the decommissioning blockage.

- (ii) we should maintain a propaganda offensive against PIRA/Sinn Fein. We want to demonstrate to them (and others) that they pay a real price for their double-think war/peace strategy. The keys lie in Washington and Dublin. The climate is propitious - both Governments feel (rightly) conned. We should urge both to cut off Sinn Fein from high-level contact for a significant period (not necessarily for ever), and press on the Americans steps such as prevention of Sinn Fein fund-raising and the closure of the Sinn Fein office. I am in Washington on Friday talking to Lane and intend to take that line.

Despite the urgings of Trimble and others, I do not think we should lurch into the kind of counterproductive security measures we discussed and rejected both after South Quay in February and most recently in July. The RUC and GOC can be relied upon to take the right security measures in Northern Ireland, depending on the threat, with the right mixture of visibility (and consideration for the people). As we know, the best weapons against terrorism are good intelligence, and a good information strategy. That is where our efforts should continue to be directed.

I think there is a need for collective Ministerial discussion of all this next week. An NI meeting is being tentatively fixed for next Thursday. It should look at security, the talks, information strategy and Hume/Adams. Content with this?

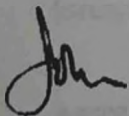
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As for Trimble, recent events have shown him at his worst. After appearing constructive over decommissioning for some weeks and all but agreeing our approach in detail, he abruptly shifted gear, produced and published his own unhelpful paper effectively resurrecting Washington 3, and then characteristically accused NIO Ministers of taking no notice of what he had been saying. Since Monday's bomb, he has helpfully urged the loyalists to show restraint, but has otherwise called for a security crackdown (totally unspecified), accused you of holding out an olive branch to the IRA, and more or less called for Mayhew and Ancram to be sacked. Some plain talking is needed. You will want to finish on a constructive note with him, but his recent behaviour hardly deserves a reward.

Partly for that reason, I think you will find Paddy Mayhew arguing in Bournemouth against offering language on the Grand Committee and decommissioning legislation in your speech. He is worried about offending nationalists, while taking no tricks with the Unionists (and rewarding Trimble for intransigence). He has a point, but the politics obviously go wider than this. One way to tackle the point may be to include more explicit language reassuring nationalists about your commitment to meet their legitimate grievances, while making a sharper distinction between moderate nationalism and violent republicanism, and kicking the latter very hard.



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MEETING WITH TRIMBLE

- IRA return to violence in Northern Ireland disappointing but not surprising.

Determined to use present situation to the full to expose the hypocrisy of Adams and co.

- Security will be stepped up to meet the threat. But terrorism will be defeated by intelligence, and the right information strategy, not crackdowns which can too easily backfire, as we know to our cost.
- But the best answer to the IRA is to show that they cannot block the political process, or get closer to it, through violence. They only exclude themselves ever more firmly.
- So we need to move the talks on to the political substance now. Know that is what you want too.
- Not sensible if the talks are held up by arguments about decommissioning, when this looks a hypothetical problem for the foreseeable future.
- Agree that the importance of decommissioning has been increased by recent events. But can we find a way to make this clear, and set the parameters for it, without playing Sinn Fein's game through a sterile debate?

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- Trick is to make clear there is no escape from Mitchell and genuine parallel decommissioning. Everyone should be able to agree on that. If Sinn Fein did ever join the talks, you would have no difficulty blocking political progress if there was no decommissioning in practice, and we would support you.

- We have the chance to engage the Irish Government and SDLP in a real negotiation about a political settlement in Northern Ireland, without them looking over their shoulder for Sinn Fein. But we have to go for this now.

Understand Unionist fears about being abandoned in some way. Want to use my speech on Friday to help reassure the Unionist community. More fundamentally, any conceivable outcome of the talks will be based on the continuation of the Union. So fears misplaced, and Unionists can enter talks with confidence.

Meanwhile common cause not helped by criticism of the Government.
We must work together against republican terrorism, not fall out.