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to Chequers 19/10 21/8

File

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From: John Holmes  
Date: 27 August 1997

PRIME MINISTER

cc: Jonathan Powell  
Alastair Campbell

NORTHERN IRELAND

You are seeing Mo at 0900 tomorrow and Trimble at 1230, after your school visit.

As far as Mo is concerned, you should still have a bundle of papers setting out her views on the way forward, with a covering minute from Philip of 22 August.

... I now also attach a paper setting out the reasons why Sinn Fein should be admitted to the talks.

(To follow)

Mo is right to be generally upbeat about developments during August, but the signs are that the Unionists – and at least some of the Loyalists – have worked themselves into a very negative frame of mind, and will be hard to deal with in the next few weeks. They believe Mo and the NIO are so concerned to keep Sinn Fein/the Irish/the US happy that they will do almost anything to achieve this, and have lost sight of Unionist concerns. They see this in apparent signals of readiness to be too lenient with Republican prisoners, in what they claim is lack of real progress on decommissioning, and in what they see as the unseemly rush to give Sinn Fein a clean bill of health. Most of this is exaggerated, if not actually false, but there may be an element of truth in the perception of more concern about Nationalist than Unionist sensitivities (and, as I have said before, there are real dangers in an approach involving too close a front with the Irish Government, eg planning a raft of joint consultation papers on the substantive talks).

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In any case, all this makes handling Trimble harder. He has already said publicly he is not prepared to see the talks move beyond decommissioning until he is satisfied with progress; and has been insisting he must be consulted before any decision on Sinn Fein's entry to talks. Meanwhile, Sinn Fein has publicly hardened their position against proximity talks.

With this background, I think you need to cover with Mo:

1. The decision on Sinn Fein. There is no real doubt about what the decision should be but how/when to present it (Mo has reluctantly accepted that announcement on Thursday is out)?
2. Approach to the resumption of the talks: chances of the UUP staying in? chances of moving beyond decommissioning without explicit agreement? Prospects for proximity-style talks if necessary?
3. Decommissioning arrangements: if de Chastelain chairs the Independent Commission, as we want, would this have to mean reshuffling other Chairmanship arrangements? (The Irish want Mitchell to replace de Chastelain as Chairman of Strand 2 (North/South) talks, which the UUP will not wear).
4. Handling Trimble: still worth trying to get more out of the Irish on decommissioning and (particularly) consent? Can we get enough to change Trimble's position? Any real point in writing to him at this stage? (Record of your last meeting with Trimble attached).

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5. Possible visit by you to Northern Ireland (19 September is the earliest date we can identify).
6. Meeting with Adams (unavoidable at some stage – first meeting during your visit to Belfast rather than at No 10?)
7. Cover during Mo's (much needed) two weeks holiday starting on Saturday.



**JOHN HOLMES**

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