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John 9/8

The Prime Minister did not react to this apart from saying he agreed with X over. I told Ken Lindsay, who said that Mo Mowlam saw things the same way. The NIO are working

PRIME MINISTER

on a package of confidence building measures (aimed at both sides) for her to discuss with the PM when they meet on 28 August.

NORTHERN IRELAND: PRISONERS

From: Philip Barton
Date: 13 August 1997

cc: Jonathan Powell (o/r)
John Holmes (o/r)
Alastair Campbell (o/r)
Allan Percival

File 49/115/8
FAXED - To PM's Party in Tuscany (Via Green)
13/8/97
(2020)

You should be aware that the Prison Service plan to downgrade the security classification of 13 PIRA prisoners on Monday from "exceptional" to "high" risk. This means they will be shifted from Special Security Units. The main benefit for the prisoners is that they will be allowed "open" visits (i.e. will no longer have to see visitors through glass).

The Prison Service decision is an operational one. It would be open to you to intervene on political grounds, but I do not think you should do so. The decision has been endorsed by Mo Mowlam and Joyce Quinn (in Jack Straw's absence) and is based on the assessment that, with a PIRA ceasefire in place, the risk of an outside assault on a prison to assist an escape is much reduced. The prisoners will still be subject to a high level of security.

The Prison Service intend to present the decision in a low-key way. They will say that it is an operational one, based on the assessment of the threat. They will also make clear that it is not a concession to Sinn Fein, nor something promised in exchange for the ceasefire.

Nevertheless, the decision may well be criticised by the Unionists as further evidence that the Government is making concessions to Sinn Fein and the IRA (it

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flows from Quentin Thomas' letter to Sinn Fein of 9 July). It will also come on top of:

- Mo Mowlam being quoted in the Sunday Telegraph as raising the prospect of the early release of terrorist prisoners if the ceasefire holds. (The NIO say that her remarks were taken out of context.)
- NIO sources being quoted in the Guardian yesterday as being alarmed about the effect on the peace process of three IRA prisoners who escaped from the Maze in 1983 losing the latest round of their fight against extradition from the US.
- an NIO spokesman being quoted in the Belfast Telegraph yesterday as saying that the Government had not ruled out two-thirds remission for paramilitary prisoners in Northern Ireland. (The NIO deny ever having said this.)
- the release of two minor IRA prisoners in the Republic earlier today.

X | I have made the point to the NIO that the various things coming out on prisoners at the moment have a distinctly "green" tinge. We should, if anything, be leaning more towards the Unionists at present. It is they who need reassurance. NIO have taken the point, but do not have any bright ideas of what we might do.

Otherwise, as you have probably heard, Ken Maginnis and Martin McGuinness had a live debate on Newsnight last night, chaired by Gavin Esler. It was a

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pretty stony affair, with Ken Maginnis refusing to look Martin McGuinness in the eye and accusing him of being the "godfather of godfathers". There was little that was new, but the two sides did at least avoid digging themselves into even more entrenched positions. Martin McGuinness just about won the debate on points, mainly by portraying Ken Maginnis as intransigent and unwilling to talk.

*Philip***PHILIP BARTON****CONFIDENTIAL**