



NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE
WHITEHALL
LONDON SW1A 2AZ

John Holmes Esq
Private Secretary to the
Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
LONDON
SW1A 2AA

28 October 1996

Dear John

HUME/ADAMS: MEETING WITH HUME

1. Thank you for your letter of 27 October. This letter provides analysis on that, and briefing for the Prime Minister's meeting with John Hume tomorrow.

Where do we stand?

2. The Irish Government and the SDLP (Mallon as well as Hume) will clearly not support a three month delay period. That is the period NI envisaged, but they implicitly authorised negotiation downwards. To go ahead and publish new conditions of entry including a three month delay period without their support would:
 - provoke open disagreement with the Irish Government and the SDLP, which would remove pressure on Sinn Féin to respond positively;
 - give Sinn Féin a propaganda advantage because they could claim Irish Government and SDLP support for their view that any delay period was a new pre-condition and the British Government was stalling again;

CLOSED UNDER THE
FREEDOM OF INFORMATION
ACT 2000

- lose any prospect of the Irish Government, the US Administration and SDLP helping to make progress in the talks possible without Sinn Féin, because they would believe we have spurned a reasonable chance to bring them in;
- if Adams is to be believed, lose the prospect of a ceasefire and, most likely, much chance of avoiding loyalist violence;
- nor would it buy much with unionists. They have rejected the notion that they could soften their position on decommissioning in return for a three month delay period.

But to proceed without them looks likely to lead to the worst of all worlds - stalled talks leading to collapse and loyalist violence; no ceasefire; and HMG blamed by most nationalists for adding new pre-conditions.

Equally, however the Irish side may behave, we cannot allow Sinn Féin simply to dictate the terms. Instead we need to continue to seek an approach which the Irish Government and the SDLP will support so that, when it is put to Sinn Féin, they are the ones under pressure:

- either they deliver a ceasefire which, although it would create difficulties of its own, would be a significant prize;

- or they fail to do so, and therefore lose credibility with the Irish Government and the SDLP who could in those circumstances be persuaded to take the talks forward without Sinn Féin.

But the key to this approach, is securing Irish Government and SDLP support for whatever is put to Sinn Féin. American backing is almost as important and in the event of breakdown would be very valuable.

But is this achievable - they will only support what is acceptable to Sinn Féin.

Avenues to explore

In this context, there are a number of avenues still open to us which would be worth exploring with either Hume or the Irish Government or both. We would need of course to be satisfied that such avenues were not inconsistent with the outcome of NI.

- compromise on the delay period: there are signs the Irish Government would support a delay period of three - four weeks. We have so far stood firm on three months but we could indicate a readiness to compromise. It might be possible to use the likely recess in negotiations over Christmas to good effect. Taking a decision over Christmas would mean Sinn Féin joining the negotiations in some two and a half months, but they might only be missing out on six weeks or so of negotiations;
- explore other ways of presenting a delay in a more neutral fashion: again, if presentation is the core of Sinn Féin's concern, then it may be possible to present a delay period more positively. For

Too short.

Possible to phrase it like this.

example, we could undertake that Ministers will meet Sinn Féin within, say, a fortnight of a declared ceasefire in order to explore what assurances there are that it is unequivocal, to describe the progress made so far in the negotiations and to explore confidence building measures on both sides. This option could be referred to as an airlock rather than a probation or decontamination period ie a means of entry.

a meeting,
yes - a
fortnight is
a bit
short.

- establish what a new ceasefire announcement might say and what it might actually mean in terms of events on the ground: this is worth doing anyway and has Irish Government support. But in so doing, we must be careful not to be seen to be erecting new pre-conditions. Reassurances on "permanence", consent, an end to surveillance and targetting etc would be positive signs which would help HMG come to an early judgement, but we should not get into the position of requiring any of these because that simply will not secure Irish Government or SDLP support. We are doing further work here on the positive signals which Sinn Féin could make. Although some cosmetic improvements might be secured, the prospect of anything dramatic must be small; ✓

- make clear Sinn Féin cannot enter the negotiations at once, but avoid setting an explicit three month delay period: we could put back to Hume a text which, while making it clear that Sinn Féin could not expect to enter negotiations immediately, and that we would look for consistency between words and actions, did not mention a specific three month

period. This would leave us the flexibility to take the time we considered necessary, without confronting Sinn Féin, the Irish Government and the SDLP with a specific time period which they have told us would be unacceptable. A possible text for this purpose is attached, with the key paragraph underlined. The sentence beginning 'Each atrocity' are Humes' own words in the talks yesterday.

All of these offer worthwhile avenues to explore. But increasingly it looks as if we may face the most difficult of all decisions, between:

- rejecting the initiative, or responding in terms which we know will be interpreted as a rejection: this would wreck the talks process, even without Sinn Féin; lose whatever prospect of a ceasefire there was and make the maintenance of the loyalist ceasefire almost certainly impossible; and, while making it easier to preserve a consensus with the unionists, would not secure movement from them; there would be a likely slide back into general violence in the worst possible scenario from our point of view.
- or responding positively on a basis which would secure Irish Government, American and SDLP support: this maximises the chances of getting Irish, American and SDLP support for making progress without Sinn Féin, if no ceasefire results; and, if a ceasefire is delivered, achieves that significant gain (although in the process it may make short term progress in the talks impossible - as the

Taoiseach pointed out, unionists can insist upon a delay period simply by walking out).

Neither of these is risk free: each could be very damaging. But, on balance, it seems clearly in our interests to keep in play the second option which offers the chance of making progress whether or not there is a ceasefire.

Yes -
but how?

Prime Minister's meeting with Hume


Hume will be looking for a definitive response in his meeting with the Prime Minister tomorrow. He will be hoping for fresh text to take back. He will be inclined to interpret anything else as deliberate stalling, or tantamount to rejection of the initiative. In those circumstances, we cannot rely on his confidentiality.

So the Prime Minister's objectives for the meeting might be to:

- persuade Hume that we take the initiative seriously; ✓
- show we want to find a way forward which would bring about a ceasefire if one is on offer; ✓
- but have to take account, like everyone else, of the political realities we face. ✓

The key points to make might be:

- scepticism about how serious Adams is, and the nature of any ceasefire if one is announced;


- 
- can Hume produce any firm evidence that Adams is serious? What would be the terms of any ceasefire? How would it be reflected in events on the ground?
 - of course we would like to see an unequivocal ceasefire. Despite all the IRA has done, we have kept open a route into negotiations for Sinn Féin. Treated this initiative seriously even though much evidence suggests the IRA wants war;
 - but every atrocity reduces our room for manoeuvre. Politically unrealistic ^{for} Sinn Féin to expect to sit down in the negotiations as soon as the ceasefire is declared. Can't be sold to Government supporters - and, even if it could, unionists would walk out so stalling the talks anyway;
 - a break in time between ceasefire and Sinn Féin joining the negotiations is inevitable if this circle is to be squared. If there is to be a ceasefire, then we are willing to explore how best to present such a time period in a "neutral" fashion;
 - our approach is consistent with that of the Taoiseach. For example, on 16 October he said in the Dail "It is for them to work out how best they can convince others. It is their responsibility given that they were the ones who killed the people in Lisburn, Garda Gerry McCabe and the people in Manchester and London. ✓

The conditions that are being imposed are the Mitchell principles and a requirement to establish commitment to exclusively peaceful methods. It is for those who wish to prove that they do comply with the Mitchell principles and that their commitment to peaceful methods is exclusive, to produce the most convincing evidence they can in support of their contention. It is not for us to devise formulae to which they can simply sign up with no commitment. They must demonstrate the commitment from their own resources and out of their own hearts."

- understand Adams' need to get to the presentation right - but he must understand we also have to get the presentation right if the whole initiative is not to collapse.

There is a choice on text. To give Hume a text incorporating the three month delay period would be fatal: it would be interpreted as rejection of the initiative. The Prime Minister could give Hume the text attached to this letter: that makes it clear that Sinn Féin cannot expect to enter the negotiations at once, so leaving open to us the option of taking the necessary time to reach a decision. But, ideally, before handing over this sort of text, we should know whether the Irish Government would be prepared to support it - you may be able to establish that quickly with Teahon tomorrow morning.

Giving this text to Hume also has the advantage that he (and the Irish and US Governments, to whom we could copy it) would see the other changes we are prepared to make in rest



of the text. That might help avoid any impression
developing that we were rejecting the initiative by stealth.

A copy goes to William Ehrman, Jan Polley and Colin Budd.

Signed

W K LINDSAY