

23. Oct. 1996 18:45

S OF S PRIVATE OFFICE 1712106722
CONFIDENTIAL

No. 1214 P. 2/12



SECRETARY OF STATE
FOR
NORTHERN IRELAND

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

NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE
WHITEHALL
LONDON SW1A 2AZ

23 October 1996

Dear John,

HUME/ADAMS INITIATIVE: POSSIBLE PHONE CALL FROM THE TAOISEACH

As you know, discussions with the Tanaiste and Irish officials in Belfast this week have established the Irish Government's reaction to the text you sent Teahon last week. The key points are:

- the Irish Government is convinced there is a serious prospect of an IRA ceasefire, although they cannot given any guarantees;
- they assess that setting a delay period of three months would kill off any such prospect and would be interpreted by Sinn Féin as a formal signal of rejection;
- the Irish side could not support the text we had given them, in particular the three month period: their advice is that it would be better to do nothing than send a text of this kind.

The Secretary of State and Michael Ancram argued strongly that three months was the minimum realistic period and offered the only basis on which we could offer a positive response to Hume. This was not something we could negotiate on, although we recognised the possibility that the two Prime Ministers might want to have a word.

CONFIDENTIAL

23. Oct. 1996 18:45

S OF S PRIVATE OFFICE 1712106722
CONFIDENTIAL

No. 1214 P. 3/12



We have no clear word yet of any US response, but we need to decide how to respond to the Irish position, particularly in the light of a possible phone call from the Taoiseach.

Proceed without Irish support?

We could simply table our own text as it stands with Hume and proceed to publication. We have to be wary that Hume/Adams, and this Irish response, is all part of a "talk peace-wage war" strategy. We could expect widespread support at Westminster and among unionists for the need for at least a three month delay in which to assess whether any ceasefire was indeed unequivocal. But, against that:

- we have the firm Irish assessment that it would lead Sinn Féin to conclude that we have rejected the initiative. We have no reason to challenge that assessment - indeed, everything we know about the state of republican opinion suggests that it will in any event be extremely hard for Adams to secure support for a ceasefire;

- more importantly, if we published the text we now have to expect that the Irish Government would make clear that they did not support it. The Americans might well line up with them. That would make it easier for Sinn Féin to reject it, for nationalists generally to blame the British Government for further intransigence and shifting of the goal posts, and

- even if Sinn Féin are not serious about a ceasefire, to publish a text which the Irish (and possibly US) Governments will not support would enable the Irish and

CONFIDENTIAL

23. Oct. 1996 18:45

S OF S PRIVATE OFFICE 1712106722
CONFIDENTIAL

No. 1214 P. 3/12



We have no clear word yet of any US response, but we need to decide how to respond to the Irish position, particularly in the light of a possible phone call from the Taoiseach.

Proceed without Irish support?

We could simply table our own text as it stands with Hume and proceed to publication. We have to be wary that Hume/Adams, and this Irish response, is all part of a "talk peace-wage war" strategy. We could expect widespread support at Westminster and among unionists for the need for at least a three month delay in which to assess whether any ceasefire was indeed unequivocal. But, against that:

- we have the firm Irish assessment that it would lead Sinn Féin to conclude that we have rejected the initiative. We have no reason to challenge that assessment - indeed, everything we know about the state of republican opinion suggests that it will in any event be extremely hard for Adams to secure support for a ceasefire;

- more importantly, if we published the text we now have to expect that the Irish Government would make clear that they did not support it. The Americans might well line up with them. That would make it easier for Sinn Féin to reject it, for nationalists generally to blame the British Government for further intransigence and shifting of the goal posts, and

- even if Sinn Féin are not serious about a ceasefire, to publish a text which the Irish (and possibly US) Governments will not support would enable the Irish and

CONFIDENTIAL

23. Oct. 1996 18:46

S OF S PRIVATE OFFICE 1712106722
CONFIDENTIAL

No. 1214 P. 4/12



others to claim there could have been a ceasefire if it were not for the British position, so taking pressure off Sinn Féin;

- all of this would make it extremely difficult to persuade Hume and the SDLP to proceed with the negotiations on the basis that Sinn Féin were definitely not going to participate. The talks would run the risk of stalling, with consequences for the loyalist ceasefire.

In short, this risks giving us the worst of both worlds: no ceasefire, but no Irish or SDLP support for making progress without Sinn Féin.

A delay of 2½ months?

Our objective remains to make progress in the talks, with or without Sinn Féin. But we need both unionists and nationalists support to achieve that. As far as nationalists are concerned, Hume's support depends upon persuading him that we have made a reasonable response to his initiative.

Irish officials have recognised the case for a delay period of four weeks. My Secretary of State thinks that if we were prepared to accept a period of two and a half months, ie until the talks are reconvened in the New Year, this would be an offer which would be harder for the Irish Government to resist. If they are prepared to support such a delay period, then that makes it easier to attract Hume's support and, if Sinn Féin subsequently spurn the offer, to make progress without them.

CONFIDENTIAL

23. Oct. 1996 18:46

S OF S PRIVATE OFFICE 1712106722
CONFIDENTIAL

No. 1214 P. 5/12



In recommending a delay period of three months in NI 96(10), my Secretary of State said that this deliberately incorporated some room for manoeuvre in the expectation that the Irish and US Governments would seek to bid us down from this figure. NI Committee were therefore warned of the need for some flexibility.

But, if the Prime Minister agrees that we can go down to two and a half months, we should seek to extract some price from the Irish side for this. In particular, we should seek to establish that if we go back to Hume on this basis and Sinn Féin still spurn it, then the Irish Government will join with us in making progress without Sinn Féin. In other words we would seek to agree with the Irish Government that Sinn Féin would be offered this last chance to join this round of negotiations with a delay of 2½ months but, otherwise, we would proceed without them. This would help secure our objective of making progress in the talks with or without Sinn Féin.

Against the possibility that the Taoiseach will ring the Prime Minister, I attach some points to make reflecting this broad approach.

A letter from Hume?

Your letter of 21 October - copy attached recorded Hume's suggestion that he might write a letter to the Prime Minister explaining his conviction that Adams wanted to stop violence for good. In itself, we think this suggestion adds little: Hume would simply be putting in writing what he has frequently told you and us over the phone. But it suggests other possible avenues that might be worth pursuing.

CONFIDENTIAL

23. Oct. 1996 18:46

S OF S PRIVATE OFFICE 1712106722
CONFIDENTIAL

No. 1214 P. 6/12



Some evidence from Adams himself that he was serious would be a different matter. A letter, for example, from Adams to us or to Hume or some other third party stating his assessment that the IRA would respond to the sort of text we are talking about with an unequivocal restoration of a ceasefire would be of considerable value. It would be much easier to argue that we could not ignore such an authoritative statement (although, of course, the possible use we might make of it could well make Adams extremely cautious).

An alternative to a direct reassurance from Adams himself is some third party guarantees - guarantees from Hume carry little conviction and the Irish Government seem unlikely to get into the business of offering guarantees. But we could, for example, invite the US Government to establish whether Adams was serious about delivering a ceasefire and to offer us their assessment. Although they might not have more to go on than us, a positive assessment from the US Government that Adams was genuine could be a useful defensive point explaining why we felt we could not ignore the approach.

Finally, there is the possibility - which we have not ruled out in public - of a meeting between Sinn Féin and officials. Obviously that would require careful thought but it offers the most direct means of assessing for ourselves whether Sinn Féin is for real. Were, for example, Sinn Féin to request a meeting in order to offer reassurances that a ceasefire was a serious prospect, that is something we would want to consider carefully.

All of these approaches carry difficulties, but each offers some means of establishing some confidence that Sinn Féin is for real.

CONFIDENTIAL

23. Oct. 1996 18:47

S OF S PRIVATE OFFICE 1712106722
CONFIDENTIAL

No. 1214 P. 7/12



Any of them could be floated with the Irish Government or Hume if either asks us what could be done to convince us of Sinn Féin's serious intent.

A copy goes to William Ehrman (FCO) and Jan Polley (PS/Sir Robin Butler).

Yours ever,

Ken

W K LINDSAY

CONFIDENTIAL