

From: THE PRIVATE SECRETARY

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To p. 123
cc: Senon

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Jonathan Capstick Esq
PS/President of the Council
The Rt Hon Ann Taylor MP
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4 August 1997

Dear Jonathan,

Thank you for copying to me your letter of 15 July seeking the Secretary of State's views on the desirability of the President of the Council attending a meeting with Sinn Féin members about their access to the House of Commons facilities.

It is not clear from Gerry Adams' letters whether he expects the President of the Council to attend the proposed meeting with him and the Speaker, or if he is seeking a separate meeting. Either way, the response must be that the questions he raises are a matter for the House authorities and the Speaker, not the Government, and that the President's attendance would therefore be inappropriate. I attach a brief letter, for your signature, to Gerry Adams making this point.

The President of the Council may wish, however, to have a word with the Speaker to confirm the Government's continued support for the emphasis she has been careful to place (both in her original ruling and in her recent letter to Gerry Adams) on the fact that House facilities have been withdrawn from the two Sinn Féin MPs because of their declared intention not to take up their democratic responsibilities, rather than because of their refusal to take the Oath of Allegiance (as Gerry Adams' letter implies).



If this distinction is not maintained it could give Sinn Féin an added propaganda advantage and (despite our efforts to make clear that this is a matter for the House authorities, not Ministers) the Government would be blamed for denying Sinn Féin voters their democratic rights. It would be highly desirable to maintain the position that the Sinn Féin MPs are being penalised for being abstentionist, not for being Republicans.

More generally, however, the Speaker's ruling may have been so widely supported because of the absence of an IRA ceasefire. If the ceasefire holds and once Sinn Féin has affirmed its total and absolute commitment to the Mitchell principles of democracy and non-violence there could be a case for encouraging the Speaker to take a more relaxed view about the use of House facilities by Adams and McGuinness. This could deny them a propaganda point and help to tie them into democratic politics.

A further point which might be made to the Speaker is that if Sinn Féin MPs were genuinely ready to exercise their Parliamentary responsibilities (which seems unlikely in the foreseeable future) but had a genuine difficulty with the Oath of Allegiance, the Government might be willing to support adjustments to the Oath or to the associated procedures. The President will no doubt have views about the wider constitutional and political implications of any such development, but seen from here it would be a pity to leave Sinn Féin with a genuine reason for continued abstention and (if their abstentionist policy were to change) even more of a pity to leave in place a barrier to their full participation in democratic politics on behalf of their constituents.

The President may wish to touch base with the Secretary of State nearer the time of the Speaker's proposed meeting (which is scheduled after the recess) for an update on the position.



I am sending a copy of this letter to Mark Adams at No 10.

Yours Sincerely
Jul McKervill
J McKERVILL