

From: THE PRIVATE SECRETARY



NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE
STORMONT CASTLE
BELFAST BT4 3ST

Tel. Belfast (0232) 520700

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

*Seen by fax C: PB
(+ agreed) ✓ PV*

JH
22/9 -
September 1997

Dear John,

ACCESS TO GOVERNMENT: SINN FÉIN

You will wish to know that Ministers have recently approved revised guidance on contact between Government Ministers and officials and Sinn Féin representatives. This guidance has been agreed in the wake of the Secretary of State's announcement on 29 August that the necessary requirements for Sinn Féin's participation in the Talks have been met and Sinn Féin's affirmation of the Mitchell principles of democracy and non-violence on 9 September.

The New Policy

The new policy which has recently been agreed by NIO Ministers is that for so long as Sinn Féin remain eligible to take part in the Talks and the ceasefire holds, the Government would be ready to consider requests from representatives of Sinn Féin to meet Ministers and officials on their merits and on a similar basis as requests from other parties having regard to the level of their electoral support and political representation.

It would be helpful if Whitehall Departments could follow a consistent approach with our own and with this in mind I should be grateful if Private



Secretaries could arrange for the relevant persons in their Departments to be informed of the new policy. We are separately preparing revised guidance to overseas Posts, in consultation with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Points to Note

Some particular points to note are:

- i) Sinn Féin should not expect automatic access to Ministers: if a meeting were justified, it might be more appropriate, as with other parties, for it to take place with officials responsible for the matters in question;
- ii) we would not wish contact between Government Ministers and officials and Sinn Féin to get out of step with that with other Northern Ireland parties. With this in mind, it would be helpful if, at least for the next couple of months, Departments could keep the Constitutional and Political Division of the NIO informed of any proposals for meetings with Sinn Féin (telephone: 0171 210 6575/6).
- iii) the new policy has been specifically introduced on the basis that it will continue in operation only for so long as Sinn Féin remain eligible to participate in the Talks and the IRA ceasefire remains in place. The policy would therefore have to be reviewed again urgently, were either of these two factors to change.



- iv) each case should be assessed on its merits, taking into account how similar requests from other constitutional parties of a similar stature would be dealt with.
- v) in cases of doubt, advice can be obtained from the Constitutional and Political Division of the NIO (telephone: 0171 210 6575/76).

I am copying this letter to the Private Secretaries of Cabinet Ministers and to Jan Polley in Sir Robin Butler's office.

Yours sincerely,
R P Lemon

R P LEMON
Private Secretary to Paul Murphy MP