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to Chequers

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John
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From: John Holmes
Date: 25 September 1997

PRIME MINISTER

cc: Jonathan Powell
Alastair Campbell

NORTHERN IRELAND

Just one new point to report: the Taoiseach's office told me that they will be releasing five republican prisoners tomorrow (Friday). I said that they should not expect any cheers from us – this would just fuel Unionist fears about endless concessions to republicans. Teahon acknowledged this but made clear that the pressure on them to do something on prisoners was huge – and the timing was dictated by their belief that the IRA General Army Council would now take place this weekend. The Sinn Fein leadership needed to have practical gains from the ceasefire to point to.

Teahon wondered whether we could not follow suit by releasing some loyalist prisoners. I made clear (again) that this was not a serious runner. Our system hardly lent itself to releasing prisoners on essentially political grounds. In any case, we could not discriminate between one category of prisoners and another: if we were to let some loyalists out, we would also have to let out a larger number of republicans, not to mention ordinary criminals.

The Irish let out prisoners during the last ceasefire, so it is not surprising that they are doing so again, though it is not helpful either. Last time round, we took various gradual steps on the prisoner front, such as increasing remission rates to 50%. These were never revoked, so we cannot pull the same trick now. But I am still encouraging the NIO to look for something more we can do for loyalist prisoners.

JOHN HOLMES

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