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From: D J R Hill
Political Development Team
27 November 1996

cc PS/Michael Ancram (B&L) - B
PS/PUS (B&L) - B
Mr Stephens - B
Mr Beeton - B
Mrs Mapstone - B

PS/Secretary of State (B&L) - B

CABINET BRIEF

As requested, I attach some bull points on which the Secretary of State may be able to draw at Cabinet tomorrow.

Signed

D J R HILL
Political Development Team

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BULL POINTS FOR CABINET

Hume/Adams

The initiative has gone public in circumstances which leave HMG potentially exposed to united criticism from Sinn Fein, the SDLP, the Irish Government and the US Administration for messing up an opportunity to bring about a permanent IRA ceasefire.

Adams has highlighted the lack of any indication as to the timescale of Sinn Fein's entry to the talks after a ceasefire as the main problem.

We must preserve the necessary element of conditionality but have accepted and (with NI agreement) were prepared to say that an unequivocal ceasefire now, matched by events on the ground, could lead to Sinn Fein joining the talks after a long Christmas break.

The Irish (and Sinn Fein) rejected that because of the delay between ceasefire and invitation. However, the Irish are now hinting at and Tony Lake has formally put to us just such a proposal.

We must publish - preferably today - the text we sent to Hume on 23 November. David Trimble demands no less and the talks are stalled until this issue is resolved.

But if we can set out our stall in a way which

- tackles Adams' main criticism, and
- demonstrates the consistency of our approach with Lake's

we may stand a good chance of bringing the Americans and the Irish on to our side of the argument and putting Sinn Fein under pressure from all sides to go along with the arrangements we have in mind.

I have therefore proposed that the Prime Minister should publish our latest text under a short explanatory statement which makes clear

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that we can envisage Sinn Fein's entry into the negotiations after an extended Christmas break, depending on what the IRA and Sinn Fein say and do.

This preserves our policy position but should immeasurably improve our presentational posture and put Sinn Fein on the back foot. It could bring about the ceasefire which recent developments suggest is a serious possibility; but it maximises the chances of keeping the Irish Government and SDLP on board for continuing with the talks even in the absence of an IRA ceasefire.

The long term objective remains the securing of a comprehensive agreement to end the conflict and achieve a cessation of violence. The main short term objectives include:

1. To secure an unequivocal restoration of the IRA ceasefire, as a foundation to building a lasting peace. To do this will require a ceasefire at any price, and the political process to follow. A ceasefire would be a significant step.

2. To avoid the Government being blamed for any failure of either the talks process or the peace process.

The immediate objective however is to keep the talks alive. Without further talks there would be a fullscale return to violence, or both sides and the political process to fill the vacuum, and as such is contrary to the Government's strategy of the long term peace.

3. The talks are currently in danger of reaching a point where the Government is forced to withdraw and the IRA and Sinn Fein are left to their own devices. We have to find a way through this at least until the IRA and the SDLP are in the negotiations, and require the cooperation of both in Washington. We are currently considering ways in which the Government can assist the IRA and the SDLP in a manner satisfactory to both sides and acceptable to the Government. I will report on these when they are more fully developed.

4. The main/long term objective is to bring the IRA and Sinn Fein to the talks.

5. In addition, although not being the objective of the talks, the Government will continue to work on the basis of the talks process.

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