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FROM: JONATHAN STEPHENS  
Associate Political Director (L)  
21 November 1997

1294

Copy No of 11

PS/Secretary of State (L&B) [1&2]

cc PS/Mr Ingram (L&B) [3&4]  
PS/Mr Murphy (L only) [5]  
PS/PUS (L&B) [6&7]  
Mr Steele [8]  
Mr Thomas [9]  
Mr Ray [10]  
hcc Mr Holmes, No 10  
hcc Mr Pakenham, CO  
File [11]

File  
for 5/12.

## PREPARING FOR THE WORST

This note offers some very quick first thoughts on the piece of intelligence received today.

2. This is not an assessment of that intelligence. It may be bravado or bluff, which we have seen before, intended for internal management purposes. But it would not be entirely surprising if it were not. Assuming it is accurate, what should we do?

3. I suggest our immediate priorities should be:

- (i) to head off, if we can, a return to violence;
- (ii) to preserve the political process so that it can continue if necessary without Sinn Féin;

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(iii) to ensure HMG is understood, by our key partners and the wider public, to bear none of the blame if there is a return to violence.

4. These are closely interlinked. Sinn Féin have been preparing their story for some weeks now - the process is failing and it is the fault of:

- unionists for not engaging;
- HMG for not responding positively on security force deployments, prisoners, equality issues etc;

5. If, as after the breakdown of the last ceasefire, Sinn Féin manage to get this myth established among the wider nationalist community (including the Irish and US Governments), then it will significantly limit the readiness of the SDLP to engage in the political process without Sinn Féin. If violence resumes and the political process is seen to be going nowhere without Sinn Féin, we face the worst of both worlds.

6. The best hope of heading off a return to violence and preserving the political process is to ensure that HMG not only has done all it should, but is seen to have done so by the key audiences for whose attention Sinn Féin will be fighting - nationalists, Irish and international opinion.

### Some practical proposals

7. We have a very good story to tell. This Government has moved decisively and speedily in a range of areas. We need to remind people repeatedly of the record and close off, as far as possible, areas where we may be vulnerable. Some suggestions:

- fix the Prime Minister's meeting with Sinn Féin (in hand, as I understand it, with the Secretary of State planning to make a

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positive reference in "On the Record" - this intelligence reinforces the case for doing so as a visible sign of this Government's readiness to engage with Sinn Féin on the basis of the ceasefire);

- early speeches by the Secretary of State and, if possible, the Prime Minister setting an authoritative account of the Government's broad approach. It should emphasise both the Government's record (early outreach to Sinn Féin, six weeks from ceasefire to negotiations, getting over decommissioning, the security response, the address to the equality and reform agenda) and HMG's readiness to contemplate radical change in the future as an outcome from the negotiations;
- positive demonstrations of British/Irish unity and firmness of purpose: today's PM/Taoiseach meeting; Tuesday's Ministerial meeting (possibly not now happening) and the next PM/Taoiseach meeting in December will all help. The more we can do visibly to bind the Irish Government in with our approach, including responding to their current concerns on security force deployments and prisoners, the harder it will be for the Irish Government to blame us if the worst happens. Visible British/Irish unity is also critical in holding US opinion;
- visible pressure on the UUP to engage fully in the talks: this requires a delicate touch because we do not want to scare the UUP off if they are beginning to make positive moves. But one of the key claims that may be mounted against us as an excuse for a return to violence is that the unionists refused to engage and HMG did nothing about it (or that the terms of HMG's own approach were dictated by the UUP). This might mean some more pointed comments, including from the Prime Minister, about the need for all parties to engage fully in the talks process and readiness in public to pose some challenges to unionists;

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- **progress in the talks**: the review plenary will be particularly significant. Positive signals would include some agreement, however modest, eg on the issues to be addressed and small subgroups to address them in. Direct Sinn Féin/UUP engagement would be significant. But a review plenary which turned into a decommissioning conference would be a negative signal;
- **security force de-escalation**: we have not communicated well all that has been done already. If there are further planned de-escalatory measures in the pipeline - quickly reversible of course - then this is the time to bring them forward to maximise their value. When the ceasefire breaks down, it will be too late to claim that we would have delivered a succession of measures if it had lasted longer. We will be judged on what we have done;
- **prisoners** - much the same message. The treatment this year of Christmas home leave will be important. Have we claimed sufficient credit for the Secretary of State's instruction that the Life Sentence Review Board should take into account the length and durability of the ceasefires? Can we extend this commitment to the Home Secretary? (His note to the Prime Minister of 19 November about the Balcombe Street gang poses us a dilemma - the setting of tariffs clears the way for processing of their repatriation applications. This is good news because this is virtually the only one of the unfulfilled promises in Mr Thomas's letter to Martin McGuinness of 9 July. But the bad news is the "whole life" tariffs which will be perceived by nationalists as a deliberate signal of no movement on prisoners. It is a difficult choice but I think our interests are best served by accepting the tariffs but pressing the Home Secretary to move very rapidly on the repatriations);

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- equality issues: the more we can demonstrate a serious address to these, the better. The message should be our commitment to a more equal society, regardless of the outcome of the negotiations, together with pointers to the work in hand: employment equality, police reform etc. Any visible commitments on the Irish language may have disproportionate effect in buttressing our position;
- parades: if we know that Sinn Féin are about to put themselves offside, now would not be the right time to come forward with provisions toughening the approach to protests. They would best be saved for a few weeks when Sinn Féin's arguments will get a less sympathetic hearing.

### Irish and US Governments

8. One critical question for early consideration is whether, and how much, we should take the Irish and US Governments into our confidence. It is critical to the survival of the political process that they support its continuation without Sinn Féin if there is a return to violence. Experience suggests that however firm their promises may appear to be, neither should be taken for granted. The more we take them into our confidence the more likely they will be to deploy what influence they have and the more likely they will be, if these efforts fail, to support HMG's approach. There may be difficulties about specific intelligence, but a clear and authoritative warning will alert them, help us to co-ordinate positions with them and offers the best prospect of having them on side if the worst happens.

### Conclusion

9. These are very much preliminary and individual thoughts. Some of us have been here before, of course. One of the lessons I learnt from that was that a lot of people only fully realised what they had lost when it was over.

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(Mr Thomas agrees.) We may not be able to do much about it, but we should try to emerge with as few regrets as possible.

(signed JAS)

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