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From the Principal Private Secretary

25 November 1997

Dear Gen,

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Prime Minister and Dr. Mowlam met to discuss the next steps this morning. Paul Murphy, Quentin Thomas, Jonathan Stephens, Jonathan Powell and I were also there.

The latest intelligence was considered. It was agreed that, whether or not it could be taken at face value, the government had to be seen to have done all in its power, without compromising basic principles, to keep the peace process going, with all its current participants. Various possible steps were reviewed. The following were agreed:

- i) Fix the proposed meeting with Sinn Fein for the week beginning 8 December, given Adams' apparent unavailability in the following week (in hand).
- ii) The Prime Minister would urge Trimble to find some way of demonstrating engagement between the UUP and Sinn Fein, at least inside the talks. Even if these efforts did not succeed, we should be ready to make clear publicly that we wanted the UUP to do this.
- iii) Subject to the Home Secretary's views, and within the constraints of not treating those convicted of terrorist offences as a separate category for political reasons, we should do everything we can on prisoners. In particular, we should make every effort to get all 15 remaining terrorist prisoners in Britain transferred either to Northern Ireland or the Republic before Christmas. This should include the Balcombe Street Four. We should also consider whether the regime for life prisoners under British jurisdiction could not be

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aligned more closely to that which applied in Northern Ireland. It would be helpful to send a signal of some kind that if peace and a settlement were sustained, this might affect how sentences were looked at in future, although this has obvious difficulties.

- iv) We should urge the security authorities to do as much as possible on visible demilitarisation, as long as these steps were compatible with actual security requirements and the latest intelligence. We should also explain more clearly what had been done so far. (The RUC Chief Constable has subsequently announced the end of daytime Army patrolling in West Belfast.) At the same time we should ensure that we are ready in security terms for any eventuality.
- v) The position on Roisin McAliskey was complex and the next steps essentially depended on the Germans. There was little we could do to change the position, but we should be clear that we were not responsible for any delay, and wanted to see the situation move on.
- vi) The Prime Minister would speak to Clinton and Ahern to make clear our concern about possible developments, without actually citing the latest intelligence.
- vii) Consideration should be given to a speech by the Prime Minister and/or Dr Mowlam to get our position firmly on the record. One possible point for inclusion was emphasis on the need for serious change in Northern Ireland.

The text and handling of possible "Heads of Agreement" were also considered. The Prime Minister said he preferred the simpler text he had worked on. (I attach for you only, for any comments, a possible revised version, not yet seen by the Prime Minister.) It was agreed that

- i) The Prime Minister would talk soon (probably tomorrow evening) to Trimble to preview the kind of text we had in mind, prior to showing it to him; to warn him that Mitchell was likely to table an outline text of his own next week; and to ask him to engage on this in the talks, in parallel to discussions with us and the Irish. If he could show Mitchell the text he had shown us, that would be even better.

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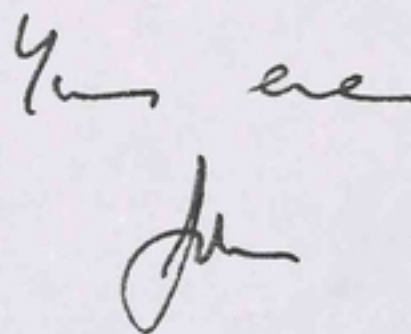
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- ii) The Prime Minister would also talk to Hume about the text, and thereafter (depending on UUP/SDLP reaction) to the Irish. At some stage, we might also need to talk Sinn Fein through the text. Our aim should not be to engage in detailed textual negotiations with any of the parties but to ensure that at least the UUP, SDLP and Irish could live with our tabling a text of this kind in the talks.
- iii) We had to ensure that this activity remained compatible with parallel developments in the talks, not least the Review Plenary. A text from Mitchell should help keep the latter on the road. One aim for the plenary outcome should be a future work plan. This should help prevent the UUP from blocking further progress over decommissioning.

The scene is of course not static, and any or all of this may need to be reviewed and revised as developments occur, but we should follow it as far as we can. I would be grateful if the Home Office could work up an appropriate plan on the prisoner issues as rapidly as possible, so that we have a clear picture of where we can go by the end of this week. The Prime Minister attaches great importance to this.

I am copying this to Ken Sutton (Home Office), Tom McKane (Ministry of Defence) and Jan Polley (Cabinet Office), but would be grateful if circulation could be very tightly controlled indeed.



JOHN HOLMES

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Northern Ireland Office

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