

From: THE PRIVATE SECRETARY  
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John Holmes Esq CMG  
Principal Private Secretary to the Prime Minister  
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28 November 1997

File  
J 5/12.

Dear John,

**PLAYING IN HEADS OF AGREEMENT**

Thank you for your letter of 27 November.

We have no comments on the slightly revised text of the "Heads of Agreement".

We suggest the next step should be to float this text simultaneously with the UUP, the SDLP and the Irish Government. We need to be confident none of these will expostulate if we are successfully to play the text into the talks. Equally, we should keep the initiative and our own room for manoeuvre and not seek to negotiate the text with any of them.

The points to be put to the Irish Government and the SDLP would be similar to those the Prime Minister has already put to Mr Trimble:

- we are concerned about the lack of progress. We think there must be an effort to see if there could be agreement on Heads of Agreement before Christmas;

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- we think the six key elements of a settlement are pretty clear. A lot remains to be done on the detail, but agreement on the key elements would represent a significant step forward which would bolster confidence in the process;
- here is the text we are working on. Should be treated confidentially. Not asking for agreement at this stage, but want to know if this text would cause any real difficulties if it were played in;
- not yet decided how and when to play it in. Do not want to detract from anything Mitchell may do during the review Plenary. But if that appears to be going nowhere, then may want to play it in next week or soon after;
- try to persuade Trimble to engage with Sinn Féin. Believe it might be possible if some such Heads of Agreement were adopted - would mean Trimble could say he was engaging with Sinn Féin on a "sensible" outcome, rather than on their agenda of a united Ireland.

Two points to bear in mind:

- (i) we must consult the Irish Government alongside the SDLP. The SDLP will tell the Irish Government anyway and the Irish Government will be highly critical if they think we are working behind their backs;

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(ii) we want to make sure that none of the key players have real difficulties with this approach. But we want to avoid becoming bogged down in agreeing precise text with any of them, because that is likely to take a long time. That is why we suggest inviting comments from all of them, but without committing ourselves to agree the text with any of them. It is also important that the text we play in with these key players is seen as a fair and reasonable compromise - that is why it would be dangerous to agree a text with the UUP first before tabling it with the others.

If it is possible to send the text out and ask for comments back by Monday, that would give us the option of playing the text in to the review Plenary during Tuesday or Wednesday. It might then offer the chance of real progress next week.

*Yours ever,*

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Ken' with a stylized flourish underneath.

W K LINDSAY

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