



PRIME MINISTER'S MEETING WITH MR AHERN, 12 DECEMBER

NORTHERN IRELAND: STEERING BRIEF

1. It is likely that discussion of Northern Ireland will form the main part of the Prime Minister's meeting with the Taoiseach. The Prime Minister's **objectives** might be to:

- emphasise that he is acting in good faith in meeting Sinn Fein, despite reports of dissent within the movement;
- ensure the Taoiseach's support for his position if the ceasefire were to break down;
- encourage the Irish to show their text of the Heads of Agreement to the UUP; and
- make the Taoiseach aware of the importance of demonstrating to the UUP that the Irish will not be held to ransom by Sinn Fein on key issues and Heads of Agreement.

Meeting with Sinn Fein

2. The Prime Minister might open the meeting by reporting on his meeting with Sinn Fein. He should emphasise the significance of going ahead with the meeting in Downing Street despite rumblings about the ceasefire and protests from unionists and others. The Prime Minister should also make clear his expectation that the Taoiseach and the Irish Government would support HMG if, despite our efforts, violence were to resume.

Talks: Heads of Agreement

3. The Prime Minister has told the Taoiseach that he is working on Heads of Agreement with Mr Trimble, and has promised him a text. He might tell the Taoiseach that the text which the Irish have given us is promising and encourage the Irish to give the text to the UUP, indicating that we think that it is along the lines of what the UUP are likely to acquiesce in.

4. The Prime Minister will wish to decide whether he should give his version of the Heads of Agreement to the Taoiseach, or talk him through it. The Prime Minister promised the Taoiseach last Thursday to show him the text 'in the next day or two'. Although we are now working to a slower timetable, any credible text will need to have the tacit support of at least the UUP, the Irish government and the SDLP. That is best achieved by sharing the text with all of them.



5. The Prime Minister will want to make clear to the Taoiseach that he accepts that it would be better not to table the Heads of Agreement before Christmas; he might explain that his original thinking was to ensure that substantive progress in the talks could be demonstrated before Christmas. The Prime Minister should say that when the text is played in January, the two governments should emphasise the real progress that it represents, and use it to drive the process on.

Relationship with the UUP

6. There have this week been signs that the UUP have made small moves to take account of Sinn Fein's viewpoint on 'Key Issues' but without any response from Sinn Fein. Unionists will be looking closely at how the Irish government deal with Sinn Fein's views on the key issues and Heads of Agreement. The Prime Minister will, therefore, want to make the Taoiseach aware of the importance of demonstrating to the UUP that the Irish government will not allow the process to be held to ransom by Sinn Fein.

Northern Ireland Office

10 December 1997

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