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Cracknell
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Via Gmcer
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10 DOWNING STREET
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From the Principal Private Secretary

9 December 1997

Dear Gen,

NORTHERN IRELAND: HEADS OF AGREEMENT

We have discussed the negative Irish reaction yesterday to the idea of tabling the draft Heads of Agreement in the talks at this stage, and in particular to any suggestion that we might table separate drafts. You and others also reported that the general disposition of the parties in the talks was to believe that agreement on key issues, and the format of how these should be handled, would represent significant progress and would allow the talks to break for Christmas in a positive spirit. Dr Mowlam's view was therefore that tabling the draft Heads of Agreement now could lead to a serious row with the Irish; to unhealthy repercussions in the talks, including a very negative Sinn Fein reaction; and to a situation where an unagreed paper or papers would be got at by various rats over Christmas.

Irish views

Teahon spoke to me last night on the Taoiseach's return from Belfast. He said that the visit had been excellent, particularly the meeting with Trimble. The Taoiseach and Trimble had agreed to get their private discussions going once the talks had broken next Tuesday. The Irish had been particularly encouraged that Trimble had talked about the need to come to a deal quickly, with a view to a referendum in early May. Trimble had obviously wanted to avoid the marching season. The only downside of the UUP and the Irish getting down to the nuts and bolts over the Christmas period was that they might find the deal was not doable. But both sides thought it was worth taking the risk.

Teahon added that the general atmosphere in the talks had seemed transformed. He was particularly encouraged by the fact that the UUP and SDLP were now coming together to produce words. The Irish thought that, if key issues could be agreed, this would be valuable. There would then be room to

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table a more substantive document after the Christmas break. The Irish had been surprised to hear, including from Trimble, that we seemed to be thinking of tabling or publishing something on Wednesday. Was there some misunderstanding here? Trimble did not seem keen.

I explained that the Prime Minister would indeed like to have been in a position to table a draft this week. He believed strongly that the process needed to be moved on in substance, and that this was the way to do it, in order to give the parties something hard to focus on and to encourage negotiation on the detail. He had talked to Trimble and to Hume about this, and neither had discouraged him. We had also of course mentioned this to the Irish, though we had not had a draft to show them. It was disappointing that the parties now seemed too nervous to face a draft of this kind at this stage. But if that was indeed the case, I expected the Prime Minister to conclude that there was no point in tabling something. Obviously, it would be good in many ways for us and the Irish to table something together. But, frankly, we also had to keep in mind that the best way to ensure a negative reaction from Trimble was to table an Anglo-Irish document. The Prime Minister would now reflect on the day's developments, and I would be in touch with Teahon again.

Teahon took all this well. He agreed that it would have been desirable to table a draft Heads of Agreement. But the fact was that the parties were not ready for this, and were working together well in other ways. This should provide enough progress over the Christmas period. We would have to come back to the draft Heads of Agreement in January. Meanwhile, the Irish certainly shared the Prime Minister's desire to make progress quickly.

Trimble

I also spoke to Trimble last night, to cross-check his position. He confirmed that the meeting with Ahern had gone reasonably well and that practical follow-up discussion would take place once the talks broke for Christmas. He also made clear, more strongly than before, that he did not want the draft Heads of Agreement tabled at the moment. He really feared that it could not get far in present circumstances, and that he would be badly hung out to dry during Christmas. He accepted that we would need to return to the Heads of Agreement in January, and that it might not be much easier then, but he would still prefer this. Meanwhile he warned strongly against any attempt to agree a joint paper with the Irish and then table it.

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Trimble also gave his own account of the discussions in the working group earlier in the day. He had agreed with Mallon to table an issues paper which was astonishingly bland. But this had run into real trouble from Martin McGuinness because of the reference to an Assembly. McGuinness's reaction had been very harsh, and had included language which almost amounted to threatening a return to violence. But he still hoped something could be agreed this morning.

I have discussed all this with the Prime Minister this morning. He is frustrated, but accepts that we should not table a draft Heads of Agreement in the present circumstances. If the parties themselves believe that agreeing on key issues and a format is good progress, and are prepared to say so, and if they can achieve this, so be it. The Prime Minister does not see that Heads of Agreement are likely to be easier to agree in January than now, but at least this will give us more time to get our act together with the Irish and others. We must certainly not lose sight of the exercise.

I have conveyed this conclusion to Teahon this morning.

I am copying this letter to John Grant (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), and Jan Polley (Cabinet Office), and by fax to Chris Meyer in Washington and Veronica Sutherland in Dublin.


JOHN HOLMES

Ken Lindsay Esq
Northern Ireland Office

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