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From the Private Secretary

13 October 1997

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Dear Men,

MEETING WITH SINN FEIN, 13 OCTOBER

During his visit to Northern Ireland, the Prime Minister met a Sinn Fein delegation of Gerry Adams, Martin McGuinness, Pat Doherty and Siobhan O'Hanlon, at the end of his tour of the parties in Castle Buildings. Dr Mowlam, Paul Murphy, Jonathan Powell, Alastair Campbell, Jonathan Stephens and I were present on our side. The meeting took place in one of the ground floor offices, without a photographer present.

The meeting began with the Prime Minister (and Dr Mowlam) shaking the hands of all the Sinn Fein delegation. The atmosphere was relaxed from the start, with Adams asking the Prime Minister how it now felt to be in power, and the Prime Minister confirming that it was a good deal better than Opposition, since it gave the opportunity to make changes. McGuinness commented that Sinn Fein wanted a lot of changes.

Adams also gave the Prime Minister what he described as a private present which he would not reveal to the media, an Irish harp made from local materials. He commented that it was the only part of Ireland Sinn Fein wanted the Prime Minister to keep. But he added that the Prime Minister was nevertheless very welcome.

The Prime Minister said that he was pleased that Sinn Fein were in the talks process. He also wanted to emphasise that, as they were in the talks, they would receive equality of treatment. The Government recognised that there had to be a change in Northern Ireland. No-one wanted to continue with the present situation. The question was what kind of change. He believed he had a reputation for dealing straight, and Sinn Fein would find the same. There were two key issues for him. First, commitment to non-violence had to be sincerely meant. Any return to violence would mean current moves would have to stop.

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Second, there could be no change that did not carry the consent of the people of Northern Ireland. He believed that, on these foundations, a lasting settlement could be achieved, if the goodwill was there.

The Prime Minister continued that he understood something of Irish history. This was a historic opportunity. If it was not seized, it might not recur in his political life-time. He had met children from both communities that morning. He felt a deep responsibility to make the present process work. He realised the depth of feeling on both sides, but the effort must be made to triumph over these feelings. He would deal with all the parties in good faith, but he would expect to be treated by them with good faith in return.

Adams said that he acknowledged how rapidly the Prime Minister had moved to bring about the current process. Sinn Fein's commitment to peace went back a long way. But it was very difficult to pursue unless there was a level playing field. He wanted Mr Blair to be the last British Prime Minister in Northern Ireland. He wanted to avoid history lessons, but this was Ireland and it was not the responsibility of the British Prime Minister. The biggest cause of the conflict in Northern Ireland was British responsibility. Even if the Prime Minister did not accept this, the British Government had to be the engine for peace. There also had to be fundamental change. The Prime Minister needed to understand what it was like to live in one's own country without rights. For example, Siobhan O'Hanlon had been detained by the RUC for twenty-five minutes the other night, and all her papers had been read. So there was a real need for constitutional change.

Adams continued that the Prime Minister had said he valued the Union. That was perhaps a reasonable statement from the Prime Minister's point of view, but the Union had not been valuable for Ireland. But a new relationship could be established between Ireland and Britain on the basis of genuine equality. The equality agenda had to be pursued with vigour. Previous governments had paid lip service to it, but nothing really happened. People still got stopped arbitrarily by British troops. There had to be movement on issues like this, as well as others like demilitarisation and prisoners.

Northern Ireland was in fact the biggest issue facing the Prime Minister, and he could make the difference which would bring peace after so many hundreds of years. Whatever differences there were between Sinn Fein and the British Government, he was prepared to talk with a clean slate. So he repeated his welcome to the Prime Minister. He would like to meet him again, as well as

to talk further to Dr Mowlam and Paul Murphy. He wanted to engage with the Prime Minister on a personal and psychological level, so that the Prime Minister would understand why he felt the way he did. The Prime Minister would have felt the same, if he had lived in the same place.

The Prime Minister said that people could either be victims of their history, or make some sense of it. People in Northern Ireland often thought that people in the rest of the United Kingdom were not interested in Northern Ireland, or that the position was hopeless. He did not believe either of these statements was true. They did want it settled. There was a real historic opportunity for peace, and he would do everything in his power to bring it about. It was pointless to go on in Northern Ireland as in the past. But we would need to unlock a better side of humanity to change things. Adams would have to understand him, as well as the other way round, which was why the two sides had to go on talking, and in more detail. People of his generation did not look at the problem in Northern Ireland in the way others had in the past. A sectarian approach was simply incomprehensible and had to be changed.

Adams said that the Prime Minister must have had experience in his own country of situations where one group of people were subservient and another dominant, whether this was on the basis of race or some other factor. Unionists were his neighbours, and he wanted to be flexible and generous to them. But there could be no going back to the old days of a one-party state. The present generation of English leaders did not feel a responsibility for what had happened in the past. But the reason why Unionists felt in a special position was that they had been put in that special position. It was after all not so many years since a Prime Minister of Northern Ireland had made clear he did not want any Catholics in his office. Today, the Unionists attacked Dr Mowlam and the British Government more than himself or John Hume.

John Major had made a mess of the peace process. What was happening today should have happened in 1994. Within an appropriate context of Irishness and ideology, Sinn Fein needed partnership with the British Government. That was why more meetings were needed. As far as the causes of conflict were concerned, physical force had become a tradition in Northern Ireland, but it was the British authorities who had begun this. The patrolling of British troops was still out of all proportion to the real threat. Meanwhile progress on prisoners was too slow. The Prime Minister had made a speech in Belfast giving a Unionist perspective. But Britain had also said there was no pre-conceived outcome, and that they had no selfish interest in Northern Ireland. In these circumstances,

extremists should not be allowed to dictate the agenda. The security agenda had dominated in London for thirty years, rather than the political agenda. This had to change. The Prime Minister would respond as he did if he had been in his position.

The Prime Minister asked whether the ceasefire could be held. Adams replied that the last ceasefire had been genuine. "They" had not had to do it, or hold to it, but they had. The quid pro quo for the first ceasefire should have been substantive talks. Sinn Fein's commitment was to say to those advocating physical force that this was not an alternative to the present way forward. There was no point in engaging in the politics of violence. There had of course been many victims of violence, not least of British soldiers and the RUC. But IRA violence had now stopped. The big challenge for him and others like him was to bring "these people" along. A climate of constructive dissent had to be created. He did not want an Irish Hamas to appear. Irish history was littered with examples of this and he did not want another one.

McGuinness added that Jim Molyneaux had said, after the declaration of the first ceasefire, that this was the most destabilising development in the history of Northern Ireland. This was an incredible statement, but one which revealed a Unionist point of view. Too many people had seen Northern Ireland from a security perspective, and had had the aim of splitting the IRA. But Northern Ireland was a political problem which needed a political solution. He had learned a lot from Cyril Ramaphosa and Rolf Meyer. They had explained how the South African problem could not be solved until it was seen as a political problem, not a security problem. This had led to Mandela's release. John Major had pursued an essentially military agenda. The Prime Minister had recognised a different way forward, but there was much much more to be done.

McGuinness continued that the talks were a very unwieldy, imperfect process. He wanted to get a grip with the issues, but there were people at the talks who did not want to negotiate with him, or indeed with any of the other parties either. The only person who could bring them to a sensible dialogue was the Prime Minister. It was the Prime Minister's influence alone which had cut short the absurd discussion of decommissioning. He and Gerry Adams had taken more risks for peace than anyone else. It was very difficult trying to persuade others that the present course was right. But they knew that, in the end, the dispute could only be resolved politically, whether this was now or in 25 years time. They knew that they would not get everything they wanted, but neither would the Unionists. Meanwhile the agenda of equality was extremely

important, in areas like jobs. Otherwise his community had perpetual second class citizenship.

McGuinness added that he had seen reports that there might be some announcement about Bloody Sunday, and that this could take the form of an apology and perhaps announcement of an inquiry. But the people of Derry were not interested in an apology or an inquiry of this kind. They would only accept an independent international investigation. This was a massive issue which had to be resolved by the British Government.

Adams added that there was also the case of Brian Nelson, a British military intelligence agent who had worked to bring in guns to Northern Ireland to kill Catholics with the explicit knowledge of the British authorities. These weapons had been responsible for many attacks, including the grenade attack on his own wife. There was a real can of worms here. There were 400 disputed killings. He knew people had suffered at the hands of the IRA, and he regretted this. But it was very hard to accept conclusions that people had been killed by soldier A or soldier B with no further pursuit of the issue. These symptoms of conflict had to be resolved. Bloody Sunday was only the tip of a bigger iceberg. For the wound to genuinely heal, it had to be cleaned out thoroughly. Everyone would have to admit their responsibility and their remorse. This would include Republicans.

Invited to comment, Pat Doherty said that all the problems, including consent, could be addressed as long as the right context was created, and political will was there.

The Prime Minister agreed that these problems could be addressed. The political will was there on his part. But he had to repeat that, if violence started again, what had been achieved would be lost. He agreed that there had to be an equality of treatment for all, because otherwise no settlement could be lasting.

Adams said, in friendly conclusion, that he hoped the Prime Minister would make a better job of it than Lloyd George, the last Prime Minister to meet Sinn Fein. Asked if she wanted to comment, Siobhan O'Hanlon said that she would be happy with a declaration of intent (to withdraw). McGuinness repeated that he hoped there could be another longer meeting with the Prime Minister soon. They needed to be treated like the other parties. Gerry Adams deserved more time with the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister accepted this.

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The meeting broke at this point, with Adams wishing the Prime Minister luck. It had lasted some 25 minutes altogether.

Comment

The Prime Minister was pleased with the meeting, and appreciative of the way Adams and McGuinness handled the meeting and themselves. They did not lecture too much. His assessment remains that they want to take a peaceful road, although this is not to say that they will in the end do so. In any case, the meeting served its purpose of getting over a difficult psychological hurdle without too much trouble, despite the minor orchestrated scenes in the Connswater shopping centre. The Prime Minister is ready to have a further meeting with Sinn Fein, presumably in Downing Street. We might think about doing so in 5 to 6 weeks time. But it would be useful to have reasonably soon a considered assessment of Unionist reaction to the meeting and to recent developments, particularly inside the UUP.

I am copying this to John Grant (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), Ken Sutton (Home Office), Jan Polley (Cabinet Office), Stephen Wright in Washington and Veronica Sutherland in Dublin.

Yours
John

JOHN HOLMES

Ken Lindsay Esq
Northern Ireland Office

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