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PRIME MINISTER

From: John Holmes
Date: 16 December 1997

cc: Jonathan Powell
Alastair Campbell
Philip Barton

IRISH PRISONERS

I attach the longer-term paper from the Home Office/NIO you asked for some weeks ago, and a covering minute by the Home Secretary.

The paper is good. It sets out clearly the short-term possibilities for more prisoner moves (very limited) and the longer-term options in the context of a peace settlement. The advantages and disadvantages of the options are well explained.

Overall, I find the paper makes a good case for having some kind of scheme for possible prisoner releases (or at least new sentencing reviews) in the context of a settlement. As you know, I have always been very nervous about the difficulty of defending anything which smacks of acceptance that prisoners convicted for dreadful offences were really political prisoners - early releases in any case stick in the craw. The reaction in Britain itself is always likely to be hostile.

But the pragmatic arguments for increasing the chances of a settlement and binding potential extremists into it by giving them a vested interest in its success, are difficult to ignore. The idea of an independent Commission to review sentences after a settlement strikes me as a good one. The only major query I have is the acceptance that terrorist prisoners, once released because peace was

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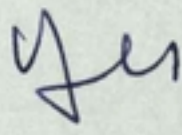
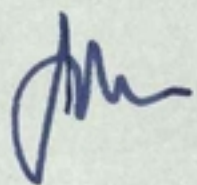
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there, could not be got at in any way if peace broke down. It would seem to me much preferable to have a lasting incentive to maintain peace for such people if at all possible.

This is highly sensitive and difficult territory, which you need to discuss with colleagues (I suggest in IN Committee, not just with Jack and Mo, both to canvass wider opinion of detailed senior colleagues more able to see the wood for the trees and to bind them into any decision). Mo, inevitably, is in a tearing hurry. I do not think there is in fact a huge rush. We may want to signal at some stage in the talks (eg February) that we are thinking seriously on these lines, but should not reveal our hand too soon.

You could have a preliminary go over the ground with Jack and Mo on 5 or 6 January, to commission further work as necessary. We could then schedule IN for the second half of January, when another review of general policy would in any case be useful.

Are you content in principle for officials to go on working up ideas of the kind set out in the paper, and to have meetings with Mo and Jack, and then IN Committee, as proposed?

**JOHN HOLMES****CONFIDENTIAL**