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From the Private Secretary

22 December 1997

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MEETING WITH THE TAOISEACH, 21 DECEMBER

The Prime Minister and the Taoiseach had an informal one to one chat before the Newcastle v Manchester United football match, which they were attending independently. They chatted for 40 minutes or so, in an apparently excellent atmosphere.

The Prime Minister has given me the following brief account. He said that they had covered the usual waterfront of Northern Ireland issues. There had been no particular new themes since the last conversation in Luxembourg. As reported in the press, Ahern had raised the possibility of the release of Loyalist prisoners, to match the Irish release of Republican prisoners last week. The Prime Minister had said that there was no change in our position.

A good deal of the conversation had been about North-South issues. Ahern had made clear again that he wanted to see a series of all Ireland bodies. They could have limited scope, but they needed to be there. He was prepared to go quite a long way on the East-West front in return for this. The Prime Minister had repeated his view that the UUP's problems on the North-South front involved presentation more than substance. He believed that their protection lay in the insistence on unanimity before such bodies could take any action.

More widely, the two agreed that they would both seek to move the talks on urgently when they resumed in January. Ahern had referred to Irish contacts with the Unionists over the Christmas break in such secretive terms that the Prime Minister had not realised he was talking about the meetings of which we were already aware.

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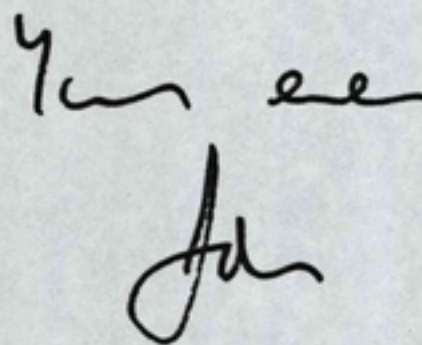
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Ahern had also talked about Sinn Fein and the Sinn Fein leadership. He regarded Adams as a man who could lead his party in a genuinely political direction. McGuinness on the other hand was both ideologically driven and unlikely to be willing to give up violence for good. Ahern added that, if the IRA did go back to violence, the Irish would stick with us and abandon them. He had stressed that it was important for the Prime Minister to know this. Both Governments had to keep the SDLP on track for a settlement. The Prime Minister found this quite encouraging.

I checked with Philip McDonagh from the Irish Embassy, who was in Newcastle with the Taoiseach, in case he had a fuller account. He said that he did not. The Taoiseach had been very happy with the meeting afterwards, and had spoken very warmly about the Prime Minister and Dr Mowlam. On the substance, he had simply given McDonagh a press line saying that the two had had a good meeting, that they had reviewed all current issues, and had looked at how the process could be taken forward. In response to questions, the Irish should confirm that the Prime Minister could not do much about releasing Loyalist prisoners in the short term, but that further transfers were likely to be going ahead.

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



JOHN HOLMES

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