

*Prime Minister**File for 15/11*

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FM DUBLIN

TO DESKBY 141800Z FCO

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SUBJECT: NORTHERN IRELAND : REACTIONS TO THE PROPOSITIONS PAPER

SUMMARY

1. Paper welcomed by politicians and media alike. Perception that paper gives more to Unionists than Nationalists. Appreciation of efforts of the Prime Minister and others in recent days. But no-one getting carried away.

DETAIL

2. Initial public reactions to the Governments' propositions paper have been uniformly positive. Fine Gael leader John Bruton stressed the importance of the two Governments acting together, although he warned of the tough negotiations ahead. This theme was also picked up by Labour Party leader Ruairi Quinn, who also welcomed the decision to present the initiative to the all-party talks forum. Pronsias De Rossa, leader of Democratic Left was, perhaps, more cautious in his reaction to the paper which, he said, offered a "spark of hope".

3. This generally positive reaction (with a dollop of caution) dominated media reports. The Irish Times, referring to a "truly staggering weekend of diplomatic activity" applauded the efforts of the Prime Minister, but also credited Bertie Ahern with taking the risk of trying to persuade Sinn Fein to accept the emerging text. The paper acknowledged that the dominant feeling in political circles was one of relief rather than one of victory or breakthrough, and headlined poignantly "Peace Talks Finally Reach the Beginning". The Irish Independent, noting that "the propositions use the language of unionism" and that Sinn Fein were less than happy, observed that this is "more of an agenda than a blueprint", and took heart in what it saw as a "sensible compromise". The Examiner, whilst also noting Sinn Fein's qualms, also paid tribute to the "political master strokes" pulled off by

the Prime Minister and Ahern in what it referred to as their "Blueprint for Peace".

4. The Irish Government have themselves begun to put their own spin on the weekend's events, perhaps claiming more credit for certain proportions in the text than they are actually due. The main purpose of this effort, via an RTE interview by the Taoiseach, is to allay Sinn Fein concerns by talking up the proposed North/South Ministerial Council. So far Ahern does not seem to have over-compensated to the point where unionist concerns might be heightened.

COMMENT

5. Public attitudes here are those of satisfaction (at a diplomatic job well done) tempered with relief (that somehow all parties, especially Sinn Fein, have come thus far). But no-one is getting carried away, given past disappointments. As Frank Millar said in the Irish Times "... the parties well know that the devil remains where he always lay" - (ie in the detail).

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JOHN HUME

It may be worth recording a brief exchange between the Prime Minister and John Hume on the way out of the Chamber today in the House of Commons, following Prime Minister's Questions. Hume was extremely positive about the latest developments in the peace process, and said that things were now really on track. The Prime Minister asked about Sinn Féin. Hume seemed unconcerned. He would find a way to sort them out. He was turning over in his head a formulation which involved acceptance that the real borders in Northern Ireland were no longer on the ground but in people's heads, and that these could be removed through constructive co-operation over a couple of generations. That would be far preferable to two more generations of violence pushing the communities further apart.

Hume also handed over to the Prime Minister the attached letter of invitation from the University of Notre Dame, asking the Prime Minister to speak and receive an honorary degree on 17 May. The Prime Minister will not be able to do this because of the G8 Summit, but I would be grateful for a nice draft reply.

I am copying this to Denisick Chilcott (Foreign and Commonwealth Office) and Sir Christopher Meyer in Washington (by fax).

JOHN HOLMES

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Kee Lindsay, Sec.,
Northern Ireland Office.

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