

file

From: John Holmes
Date: 15 January 1998

PRIME MINISTER

cc: Jonathan Powell
Alastair Campbell
Philip Barton

CONVERSATION WITH AHERN

As you know, Ahern would like a quick word with you to follow up all your earlier conversations about Heads of Agreement. He is around tomorrow afternoon. Angus has suggested separately that you lobby him on BSE, where he is likely to be sympathetic.

On Northern Ireland, the Irish are worried about Sinn Fein, although not excessively so. Ahern is seeing Adams tomorrow morning. Thereafter the Irish have promised to send us a short paper setting out their preoccupations. These are likely to be three: follow-up to Heads of Agreement (particularly Sinn Fein), Bloody Sunday and the Balcombe Street Four.

You will want to start your conversation with a bit of mutual congratulation on how well it has gone this week, and you will want to thank Ahern warmly for all his help and flexibility. I would not however go over the top. The Irish did not do badly on North/South in the end, and if you thank him too effusively, you will increase his feeling (already there) that you owe him one – and you did promise him help over Bloody Sunday and prisoners in one conversation.

In the talks, the aim is to use next week to get down to some of the detailed follow-up discussion to Heads of Agreement. It is still not clear whether there

will be an attempt to agree the Heads of Agreement, or simply to note them and move on to the details. The latter is more likely.

On Sinn Fein, we have not yet responded to their request for an urgent meeting. Mo was supposed to be talking to Martin McGuinness today to establish how necessary this was before Sinn Fein come to London with the other parties the week after next. My guess is that Ahern will want you to see Adams soon and that the balance of advantage is just in favour of this next week, as long as you balance it with other meetings (SDLP or one of the Unionists or even Alderdice).

THIS IS A COPY. THE ORIGINAL IS
RETAINED UNDER SECTION 3 (4)
OF THE PUBLIC RECORDS ACT

t. The Irish can give such an assurance readily. It is obviously much more difficult for us. I think our line should be that we do not resile from the Framework Document, but that the Heads of Agreement stands on its own – its content has to be filled out by the parties in negotiation.

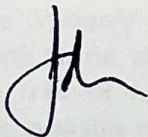
On Bloody Sunday, we are awaiting a further proposal from Mo. She is, as you know, dead-set on saying something to Parliament next week. I have sympathy with this, given the imminence of the anniversary and Ahern's proposed visit to Derry on Friday. But there is a severe danger that she will please no-one and we will finish up worse off. Paddy Teahon told me on the phone this evening that if we were not going to announce an enquiry, we should say nothing. Otherwise the Irish would feel betrayed and Ahern would feel bound to criticise us strongly.

This would be bad news, after our excellent cooperation over Heads of Agreement.

I suggest you talk this through with Ahern, without revealing too much of our intentions. We can look again at the wording of whatever we might say (recent draft attached).

[redacted] . The difficulty as always is the see-saw. The Unionists will not mind much an apology. They, and much of the establishment here, will hate a new enquiry.

On the Balcombe Street Four and their tariffs, this is still with the Home Secretary. You will recall from our meeting last week that he may now not set whole life tariffs, but 40 or 45 years instead. The Irish will not like this either – and you should not say anything to them yet – but it would at least be better than whole life tariffs because it would be easier to deal with under their system.



JOHN HOLMES

temporarily retained
**THIS IS A COPY. THE ORIGINAL IS
RETAINED UNDER SECTION 3 (4)
OF THE PUBLIC RECORDS ACT**

flahe mel

THIS IS A COPY THE ORIGINAL IS
RETAINED UNDER SECTION 31A
OF THE PUBLIC RECORDS ACT

PREM 44/405/1

leth
15/1/98