

From: John Holmes
Date: 30 January 1998

PRIME MINISTER

NORTHERN IRELAND

I attach a useful minute from the Northern Ireland Office drawing some conclusions from the three days in London. Also attached is a typically quirky piece from Quentin Thomas about the underlying picture on the negotiations. The message of both is the same, and one which you have recognised for some time, that on substance the parties are not far apart, and that the gap has narrowed in the course of the negotiations.

However, the NIO paper brings out again the difficulty we face over the process, and the clear difference of analysis and view between ourselves and the NIO about how to handle the UUP.

The NIO paper effectively argues that we must not give an inside track to the UUP, and that we must allow new proposals to emerge from the talks process. This approach is unrealistic on two grounds. There is no way of getting the UUP to a settlement without some kind of effective inside track. And there is no way that the parties are going to make any significant progress in the talks process itself, although any progress needs to be immediately fed into the talks.

I am worried about the NIO paper on other grounds too. They are suggesting producing more "syntheses" to identify areas of agreement and disagreement, and a joint "discussion" paper with the Irish on constitutional issues. I am surprised by this, since I had thought we had agreed with the Irish that there

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would be no more papers from the two Governments, at least until we tried to produce a final document. Any joint paper of any significance is likely to run into the same painful problems as we had earlier this week. The NIO do say that the two Governments should not set out their own detailed views on the issues under discussion. But I fear the difficulties apply even to papers which do not in theory do this.

The NIO also say we should resist Irish pressure to prepare jointly, even on confidential terms, a draft final document. I think this is right for the moment, but the Irish are certainly doing their own work anyway. We must do our drafting too. And at some stage we will have to share this work with the UUP, whatever the NIO think, although we must do it in a genuinely confidential way.

I would like to write back to the NIO reflecting both the areas of agreement between us, and the areas of disagreement I have identified. As we have discussed, at some early stage you will have to have a meeting with Mo to thrash out how we are going to manage the fundamental difference of approach.

Content for me to write on these lines and to fix a meeting with Mo (over a quiet dinner?)

JOHN HOLMES

yes perhaps with
you & Quatre there
for a drink
 beforehand. I believe
this tactical significance
in a serious problem