

John Holmes

From: John Holmes
Date: 13 February 1998

PRIME MINISTER

NORTHERN IRELAND

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

Things have been remarkably quiet on this front today, with the story running as well as can be expected in the circumstances. Sinn Fein have contested vigorously the idea that they have to be thrown out, using the arguments that they are a political party and violence is nothing to do with them, and that there is no evidence. But their reaction has been less virulent than might have been expected. The Irish, like us, have taken a cautious public line, but with the implication that Sinn Fein may well have to be thrown out of the talks. The media, and most of the parties, are clear that this is almost certain to be the result. But the SDLP have been notably equivocal, with Durkan insisting on the need for incontrovertible evidence.

I have deliberately not stirred up either of the Irish or the Americans today, and neither has come back to us. I take this as a good sign.

They are obviously in touch with them, trying to sell them a package under which they can reasonably expect to get back in quickly. Ahern appears to be seeing Adams tomorrow. It is possible Sinn Fein will buy this, although they will defend themselves with every

- 2 -

argument they can at the talks on Monday. But we still do not know how the IRA will react afterwards.

On the American side, I have detected no disposition to challenge our conclusions. I have stirred up Christopher Meyer to get out and argue our case with all concerned, including the point we discussed this morning about helping Adams by opposing violence. Berger told me this evening that Clinton had spoken to Kennedy, and Steinberg was working the Hill as hard as he could with a clear message that IRA violence had to be shown to be unacceptable. It was being "quite well received".

All in all, this has gone as well as we could have hoped. With luck, the date given to the UDP for their re-entry into talks will have been just enough to dissuade the UDA from retaliation, and will also have encouraged Sinn Fein to see that there is a re-entry clause.

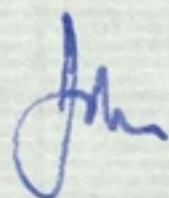
I suspect the arguments will quickly shift away from whether Sinn Fein should be thrown out, on to whether temporary expulsion is appropriate for them (the UUP and the Tories are strongly opposed), and how long the period should be. The Irish are likely to press for a date to be given to Sinn Fein now, even if only informally, and for that date to be before St Patrick's Day (17 March). They will probably get American support, because they will not want to face up to keeping Adams away from St Patrick's day celebrations in Washington, where all the Northern Ireland leaders are likely to be.

There is also a separate discussion to be had about the level and frequency of contacts with Sinn Fein, for both the Irish and us, while they are out of the talks.

- 3 -

In both cases, the best guide is probably what we have done with the UDP: five weeks out, assuming all goes well, and a gradual resumption of contact, building up from officials to ministers. Unfortunately five weeks falls just beyond 17 March.

I hope all the above does not prove hopelessly complacent by the end of the weekend.



JOHN HOLMES