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*What the amount to it: -
(a) they want 'better' language from HMG but
(b) will not offer 'better' language
to us.*

From: John Holmes
Date: 15 November 1996

PRIME MINISTER

*With attraction.
In any event, NI letter must be involved
in any decision. 17/11*

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Irish have now come back to us with Sinn Fein's response. Predictably, it is not a response at all. They are simply trying to put the ball back in our court. I attach my letter to the NIO recording my conversation with Paddy Teahon, and a revised version of our proposed statement he subsequently sent me.

As we thought it. As you will see, the Irish have extracted no language from Sinn Fein, and are clearly not going to be able to get language which is anything like what we were looking for. But they strongly believe that the Sinn Fein leadership are entirely genuine in wanting a ceasefire and are looking for an acceptable way to achieve one.

I have asked the NIO for advice by Monday evening. The NIO will obviously be tempted to revert to the idea we looked at earlier this week of going back to the Irish with a revised version of our text, which preserves the essentials of the decision agreed in NI but goes some way towards offering Sinn Fein a process of entry into talks. I attach again the sort of language they had in mind.

No. This does not look very attractive, when Sinn Fein have so obviously failed to come up with the goods. But this, or something like it, is clearly one option. The other obvious option is simply to accept that this exercise cannot go

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anywhere in its present form and either to do nothing, or to spell out publicly the conditions we believe will have to be fulfilled for Sinn Fein to come to the talks after a new ceasefire. The latter is what Trimble and co. want, since they believe it would help the talks go forward without Sinn Fein. But there are the usual dangers: we would be seen as having broken off the initiative and the SDLP might refuse to continue the talks in these circumstances.

The NIO might also seize on the other idea raised in Teahon's conversation with me, namely a direct meeting with Sinn Fein at official level. This would not be likely to take things forward in practice, but would at least show willing. But the political downsides are obvious. It does not strike me as a useful way forward.

*Not used.
Ab.*

The underlying question behind all this is whether we are prepared to live with a situation where Sinn Fein declare a ceasefire which is clearly not permanent but could conceivably become so, with all the fudging and difficulty that this would involve; or are we ready to wait longer for the IRA and Sinn Fein to come more firmly to the conclusion that violence offers no way forward, and therefore opt for the abandonment of violence.

The Irish believe that if we do not take the present opportunity, we may be in for another 25 years of violence. The NIO fear the same. I think these fears are overdone, although there is clearly a risk. The Sinn Fein leadership is in a way showing itself desperate for a ceasefire, because they have nowhere to go politically without it. But they cannot just declare one without having gained concessions from us; and they cannot say it will be permanent because that is not the IRA's strategy. Their thinking is nevertheless coming in our direction, as is their language.

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Meanwhile, efforts continue to break the decommissioning deadlock in the talks. We have been moving slowly to a position where we would support the idea of an independent commission to run the decommissioning process, including judgments on when it should start and how best it should proceed. This has greatly alarmed the Irish who see us as abandoning the existing joint position based on a sub-committee of the plenary, in order to keep the UUP sweet for electoral reasons.

✓ In practice, the position we are moving towards hardly satisfies the UUP either, although it is better in their eyes than our current stand. I attach a draft paper which the NIO are working on and may table at some stage in the talks, in case you want to glance at it. They will be trying next week to persuade the Irish to take a less apocalyptic view of it.

The good news in all this is that activity on various fronts is continuing, without large scale violence, and that the talks are still in being. The slide back into full-scale violence predicted by many has not yet happened. This suggests to me that there are significant forces on both the loyalist and republican sides helping to stop this happen. This is a ray of light in an otherwise not very encouraging situation.



JOHN HOLMES

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