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10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA

FAXED
to call 1915 15/11/96
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From the Private Secretary

15 November 1996

Dear Gen.

HUME/ADAMS INITIATIVE

Teahon rang me this afternoon with a read-out of the meeting they had held earlier in the day with Sinn Fein. McGuinness, O'Hare and McAteer had been present on the Sinn Fein side.

Teahon said that they had gone over the ground again comprehensively. The Irish had made clear to Sinn Fein again the clear limits of what was politically acceptable for the British Government. They had also made clear that, in their view, the Prime Minister was prepared to move forward if the circumstances were right. That meant that anything that smacked of a short-term tactical ceasefire was no good. It was no good for the Irish Government either. Sinn Fein would therefore have to produce some strong and convincing language.

The Sinn Fein response, leaving aside complaints about the British moving the goalposts etc, was that they were prepared to declare a new ceasefire. They were also prepared, as they put it, to put a ribbon round this. But they had to have something to show for it. And they were not prepared to accept the kind of language the Irish had been putting to them, which revolved around their "intention" never to go back to violence. They were more attracted by talk of their "desire" to avoid further violence. (The Irish had made clear this was no good.) They had not rejected Irish suggestions of referring to a "purpose" or "goal" of this kind.

But in any case Sinn Fein were not prepared to spell out the bottom line of their language until they were sure what we were going to say in our statement. They claimed that they now only had one chance to persuade the IRA to declare a ceasefire. They could not keep going back with different versions of the proposed statement, and retain their credibility.

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This was disappointing, but the Irish continued to believe strongly that if we were prepared to come forward with a definitive statement on the lines the Irish had proposed, Sinn Fein could offer some "significant" language. They were convinced Adams and McGuinness genuinely wanted a new ceasefire, could deliver this in the right circumstances, and would be working to make it last once it had been declared. All their recent conversations with Sinn Fein, and their other information, pointed in this direction.

There had been discussion with Sinn Fein of the Irish version of our statement. Teahon admitted that they had given this to Sinn Fein, but said that they had made clear to Sinn Fein that this was their version, not ours. Sinn Fein said that the 10 October text was their bottom line. But the Irish did not believe this, and thought there was some flexibility.

Sinn Fein constantly pressed for changes in the statement language on decommissioning. The Irish had told them they were wasting their time. We were at our bottom line and could shift no further. But the Irish thought there were possibilities in other areas. Teahon said that he would send me a revised version later this evening or over the weekend. The proposed changes would be in the new Irish paragraphs concerning the unequivocal restoration of the ceasefire; in the passage about the timescale for the talks (the Irish would suggest "propose and encourage" in place of "encourage"); and in the passage on culture, where they would suggest a reference to the Irish language. Teahon said that Tim Dalton had been talking to Sir John Chilcot about these changes also.

The other issue which had been discussed was the possibility of a meeting between British officials and Sinn Fein, building on a discussion earlier in the week between the Irish and ourselves in Belfast. McGuinness had said that he would welcome a direct meeting, although the Irish suspected Adams would be less keen. The Irish themselves were not sure whether a meeting with us would be a good idea at this stage. Although a direct line of communication would obviously be a good thing, it would inevitably take a number of meetings to establish an atmosphere in which things could be said as frankly as they now could be between the Irish and Sinn Fein.

I said that Teahon was telling me that they had got nothing worth having out of Sinn Fein, and would get nothing unless we were prepared to go back with a definitive version of our statement on the lines the Irish wanted. This did not take us any further forward. Teahon confirmed that this was the case. He recognised that we were in a chicken and egg situation, and that Sinn Fein were trying to put the ball back in our court. Nevertheless, he hoped we would be prepared to look again at our statement, and give it to Sinn Fein. If it did not get out of them satisfactory language, we would not of course be obliged to

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publish it. He recognised the difficulties of this for us, but did not see another way forward, except possibly through direct contact between us and Sinn Fein. But he repeated that he had his doubts about this route - at best it would take considerable time to make progress.

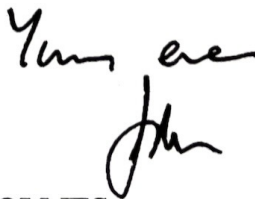
I commented that, although we had consistently said we would look at a proposal for a meeting between Sinn Fein and British officials, the Prime Minister was not signed up to this. He would want to look at any such proposal very carefully. There were significant political difficulties. Moreover, I shared Teahon's doubts about how much progress could be made down this route quickly.

I tested the firmness of Teahon's belief that a genuine and lasting ceasefire was on offer. He was firm, but recognised that the republican movement was still signed up to a twin strategy of politics and violence and could not simply ditch this. He had no doubt that McGuinness (he seemed less sure of Adams) wanted to go in the direction of "permanence". He also believed that, with another ceasefire, the culture of the organisation would shift irreversibly towards politics, as volunteers decided that they had to take up other jobs.

I concluded that we would reflect on this situation. But the reality was that Sinn Fein had not offered us anything as a basis on which to move. We would of course look at the revised text, but again this did not seem central to the issue. We agreed to stay in touch.

As discussed with Robert Crawford, I see no point in rushing into action this weekend. You will want to consider the position we have now reached, unsatisfactory as it is, and whatever text the Irish send us. It will be helpful to have advice by close on Monday.

I am copying this to William Ehrman (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), Jan Polley (Cabinet Office), Sir John Kerr in Washington and to Veronica Sutherland in Dublin.



JOHN HOLMES

Ken Lindsay Esq
Northern Ireland Office

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