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From: JOHN HOLMES

Date: 20 November 1996

PRIME MINISTER

HUME/ADAMS

... The NIO have come back with the attached revised version of the text I showed you this morning. Frankly, and leaving aside pride of authorship, I am not impressed by the changes they suggest. They make the text less clear and more weaselly.

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.... But I have suggested some small modifications to my version of the key paragraphs, shown in manuscript on the attached text. Only one is substantive: dropping the reference to 4 - 6 weeks, and substituting a reference to "due time" instead. My concern is that 4 - 6 weeks would offend both sides. The Unionists would seize on it immediately to argue, however unfairly, that we were committed to letting Sinn Fein in after 4 - 6 weeks. Sinn Fein would see it as a specific quarantine period. I tested this out privately on Michael Ancram, who agreed, but Paddy Mayhew may well not.

... The other immediate issue is the Sinn Fein request for a direct meeting. See Quentin's attached minute. Paddy Teahon did ring me but did not add anything. The NIO are strongly in favour, as you would expect.

We have discussed before. Such a meeting is politically very unattractive and would set huge alarm bells ringing on the Unionist/backbench side, even if their fears would be entirely unjustified. But saying a straight no in present circumstances is also not easy to present to the Irish/SDLP.

This needs to be looked at with the text and what we do with it. If we can agree a text, we should go back with it to the Irish very quickly (ie tomorrow)

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and then send it very shortly afterwards to Hume (we cannot allow the Irish to deflect us again, since we will otherwise be back to square one) and be ready to publish next week. You would probably not give Trimble the text tomorrow afternoon, but read out to him the key terms of entry paragraphs.

We could then reply to Sinn Fein early next week, when they have our text (and have presumably responded negatively), that if they want us to explain directly what we mean, officials would be prepared to do that. This would then be in a context where we were clearly being tough with Sinn Fein and could be acceptable to Unionist/backbench opinion.

If all this seems more or less on the right lines to you, the immediate question is other colleagues. I suggest we call an ad hoc NI immediately after Cabinet, before OPD, to show NI the new key paragraphs of the text and raise a meeting with Sinn Fein. There would be no papers, but you would want the shortest possible meeting, simply to get cover. You would need to do most of the talking, not Paddy.

Obviously not ideal with an important OPD to follow. But I do not see how we can move fast enough otherwise.

Content

- with my redraft of the text?
- to bat off the Sinn Fein request for now but be ready to look at it again when it is clear we are simply explaining our tough line?
- to hold a quick NI after Cabinet?



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