

FROM: THE PRIVATE SECRETARY

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For John Holmes.

John Holmes Esq.  
Private Secretary to the Prime Minister  
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*File*  
*Prine this in*  
*To see the NIO really*  
*beginning to gear itself up. Good*  
*for us. There is a huge amount*  
*of work here. I have made one*  
*or two marginal comments.*

February 1998

Any thoughts?

*27/2*

## CO-ORDINATING GROUP ON A POLITICAL SETTLEMENT

My Secretary of State wrote to the Prime Minister on 24 February setting out our strategy for the period ahead.

2. We are working towards a referendum on 7 May, which implies agreement by 28 March. Yesterday's meeting showed that the Irish are working to a slightly longer timescale. But for now, we will continue to focus our efforts towards the 7 May deadline.

3. To ensure that we meet that target, we have made some internal structural changes and established a number of project teams to reflect the need to:

- carry forward the negotiations to a conclusion;
- deliver the arrangements for a referendum; and
- prepare for legislation beyond the referendum.

*Bertie to me: 22nd May*  
*is date for their referendum on EU. It might be good*  
*which them both on same day. He*  
*wants to agree*  
*E. make note of*  
*old nationalism*  
*irrelevant & actually*  
*it's not a bad*  
*argument for us.*

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4. We have also established a new co-ordinating group to monitor and support work throughout the NIO and Northern Ireland Departments. Its task will be to give focus to the whole range of issues which bear on an agreement, and ensure that all the pieces of an overall settlement are in place by 28 March. The Group will meet on a weekly basis and will produce progress reports for my Secretary of State and, through her, to you.

5. The Group held its first meeting on Friday. It considered a wide range of topics, from security to economic and social issues. The key points were:

- **police reform:** aim for convergence among the parties on the principles which should underpin a NI police service, with proposals for reform to be remitted to a Commission; ✓
- **decommissioning:** preparation of draft schemes well advanced; ✓
- **prisoners:** draft proposals for release in the context of a settlement well advanced; approaching stage of instructing Counsel; table proposals by week beginning 9 March subject to specific, separate consultations with the Prime Minister and Home Secretary;
- **rights:** paper on additional measures for Northern Ireland to be discussed in the week beginning 9 March; ?
- **equality:** announce proposals for a new, statutory Equality Commission in week beginning 9 March; work up firm proposals on Irish language to be played in to talks; ?
- **parades:** Bill enacted and Commission launched; need for careful handling of announcement of Commission's preliminary view on this summer's marches - late March/early April. ✓

*Too quick -  
you and Saul  
need a v.  
careful  
Y2K  
I think is  
prisoners  
almost  
the gap*

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6. The Group discussed the need to step up HMG's information campaign in order to build popular support for the agreement and referendum. Ministers have a number of important interviews planned for this weekend. We are also arranging:

- a youth conference to encourage first time voters to participate and support the proposals, to be addressed by a Minister;
- a women's conference, to be addressed by a Minister.

*to take this* ✓

7. We are reviewing our detailed timetable of events leading up to the end of June, and will pass it to you soon.

8. A copy goes to Jan Polley.

W K LINDSAY

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