

**CONFIDENTIAL***See letter ante**John  
26/2-***From: John Holmes**  
**Date: 25 February 1998****PRIME MINISTER**  

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NIO brief attached, but you should ignore its main recommendation, namely that you agree with Ahern to work up joint proposals for presentation to the talks participants no later than 23 March. As we have often agreed, this will not work.

This means that the discussion of how to reach a final agreement will be difficult. We know the Irish are working on a paper. They know we are working on one too. I suggest that you are frank, as I have been with Teahon: tabling an Anglo-Irish paper is a sure way to ensure Unionist rejection; there will have to be a final paper on the table at the right moment, but we must pre-cook the main difficult areas with both the Unionists and the Nationalists; we will have to do much of this with the Unionists; any suspicion that we and the Irish are cooking up a paper for presentation to the parties could kill the process; let's keep in close touch without trying to agree a joint paper for now; but we could exchange versions?

You will have to be vague at the moment on exactly how we are going to do this pre-cooking. You need to discuss again with Trimble on Friday morning. Ahern is also meeting Trimble on Friday. You could therefore concert tactics, up to a point. One tactic to bear in mind is the use of Mitchell to present proposals, in

**CONFIDENTIAL**



**CONFIDENTIAL**

- 2 -

part or as a whole. Trimble indicated to you when you last met that he was not necessarily against this.

You will also need to discuss timetables. The Irish are enthusiastic about pushing on rapidly, but nervous about their own referendum for various reasons: they need a long run-up time, they are worried about the chances of winning a referendum containing constitutional change, and there is the complication of a referendum on the Amsterdam Treaty in May already.

A particular issue on the process side is the idea of a week of negotiations away from media pressures. The Irish are keen on Scotland rather than Wales. This is a perfectly good idea, but the UUP remain highly resistant to the whole concept – they fear being pressured into a deal they cannot sell and leaving themselves vulnerable to charges of betrayal.

The other big issue is Sinn Fein. Ahern met Adams on Tuesday. He made clear Sinn Fein did want to come back into the talks but needed a meeting with you first. I have made clear to the Irish in advance that you are unlikely to meet Adams before 9 March. Ahern may still press you to do so, but I think will be content as long as you indicate that you are thinking of meeting him not long after 9 March.

But you should be aware that even this is likely to provoke great trouble from Trimble. When he spoke to Mo earlier today, he warned in dark terms of the consequences for his participation in the talks if you met Adams on 10 March, followed by Sinn Fein's return (he had heard this story from a journalist). So you will need to take Trimble's temperature on Friday. You should remain

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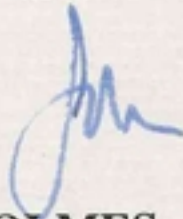
CONFIDENTIAL

- 3 -

cautious about what exactly you are going to do until then, and tell the Irish they must be careful about what they say publicly too.

The whole issue is made more difficult because of the Conway murder. As you know, the evidence suggests that North Armagh PIRA were responsible, although the level of authorisation is unclear. I think the Irish view is the same. In theory, we could exclude Sinn Fein on a permanent basis for this. In practice, this is not a runner. Our best hope is to get across somehow that, given the identity of the victim (a drug dealer), the uncertainty of the level of authorisation, and the fact that it took place before Sinn Fein's expulsion mean that further action would be inappropriate. This is not an easy message to get across, especially to already highly suspicious Unionists.

Finally, the Irish are keen that you should do something jointly for the press. I have not discussed this with Alastair yet. They would like a joint doorstep afterwards, but this would expose you both to all sorts of questions about Adams and is in any case against our general practice. An alternative would be for you both to say something very brief in the street before the meeting starts. The message would be that you are going to talk about how to bring the talks to a successful conclusion in the next five or six weeks, with a view to a referendum in May; that you realise there are problems, but are determined to keep your eyes firmly focussed on the big picture and the main objective; and that this is all you propose to say publicly. I think the Irish would live with this, and it has attractions as a clear message.



JOHN HOLMES

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