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From the Principal Private Secretary

20 February 1998

SINN FEIN: CONVERSATIONS WITH THE TAOISEACH,  
 20 FEBRUARY

The Prime Minister and the Taoiseach spoke twice on the telephone this morning to sort out the details of the proposed announcement of Sinn Fein's indictment.

In the first conversation, Ahern began by saying that, once we were through this problem, we needed to sort out how we dealt with fringe group violence. He hoped that the body found yesterday was a result of criminal/drugs activities, although that was not certain. On the text of the draft indictment, the Irish were prepared to live with a modified version of paragraph 19, as discussed between Paddy Teahon and myself. The concluding section, spelling out that any future violence would be treated differently, would be better in a covering statement rather than in a document which was supposed to be quasi-legal. Issuing it separately would in any case add to its force. On paragraph 22, the Irish wanted to stick with the wording about the date of return, that it was "the intention of the governments ...". He thought the current plan was to make the announcement at 1230. This might not be a bad time, since Adams was talking to senior businessmen in Belfast at 1 o'clock.

The Prime Minister said that, on the date, it was a question of what was do-able. We were under heavy pressure from the Unionists. He was also concerned about British domestic opinion. It would be far easier from our point of view to say that Sinn Fein could be back in by mid March, and then specify a date a few days later. We would come under comprehensive attack if we said an early date at all. He did not have difficulty with 9 March personally, but there was still a danger of losing the Unionists and Conservatives at the same time.

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Ahern said that 9 March was three weekends ahead. He also had by-elections on 11 March, and his colleagues would begin to be out of action for St Patrick's Day on 12 March. All this pointed to 9 March as the latest time.

The Prime Minister said that it would still be helpful to have a few days before such an announcement was made. That might help things to calm down. He wondered whether Sinn Fein were trying to calm things down or to wind them up. Ahern said this was not clear. They had managed to attract broad nationalist support for their position at the moment, but they could lose it if they reacted the wrong way to the announcement. The Irish had had no contact with Sinn Fein for 24 hours, but now Sinn Fein were bad-mouthing them around the place. He proposed to take them on over the weekend, and point out that the issue only arose because they had killed two people. Nevertheless, he had difficulties if a date was not specified. He believed that the Republicans were on a slippery slope, with some of the wild men slipping away to the 32 Counties Sovereignty Committee. In one sense, he was not too worried about this since he did not think the 32 Counties would ever be able to rival Sinn Fein in numbers or organisation. He thought Adams felt the same way, and did not mind losing some people, as long as he could hold the overall position.

The Prime Minister repeated that he feared announcing a date of 9 March today could lose us the Unionists and the Conservatives. He was not at all sure we could get away with it. At the very least we would need strong language to accompany this, making clear that this was Sinn Fein's last chance. He would like to reflect for a few minutes and then come back to the Taoiseach.

After talking to Dr Mowlam, the Prime Minister rang the Taoiseach again. He re-emphasised his fears about the position of the Unionists and Tories, but said that we would go with the date, given the strength of Ahern's views. But we needed to soften the words in which this was expressed, and to make absolutely clear that this depended on their adhering to the ceasefire. He would speak to David Trimble to try to soften his opposition, but it was important not to rub their noses in it by making the date too hard.

The Taoiseach said that he would be trenchant in the words he used. He thought Sinn Fein would come back in on 9 March. If they started to mess about, they would certainly be in trouble with the Americans and the Irish. He would himself begin to treat them with contempt.

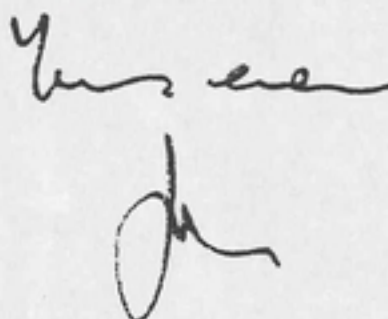
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The Prime Minister said that he would probably ring Clinton about this. Ahern agreed this was a good idea and said that we should also both pressure Jim Steinberg to tell Sinn Fein they had to play ball with the date, and avoid any violence. The Prime Minister suggested that the Irish should contact Trimble too. Meanwhile, if things turned really sour he would let the Taoiseach know.

I am copying this to John Grant (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), Jan Polley (Cabinet Office) and by fax to Sir Christopher Meyer (Washington) and Veronica Sutherland (Dublin).

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'John Holmes', with a stylized flourish at the end.

JOHN HOLMES

Ken Lindsay Esq  
Northern Ireland Office

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