

**CONFIDENTIAL**H. G.  
P. 27/13.**PRIME MINISTER****From: John Holmes****Date: 18 March 1998****cc: Jonathan Powell  
Alastair Campbell  
Philip Barton****NORTHERN IRELAND**

Mo is coming to see you at 1000 tomorrow, fresh in from Washington, to talk through the next steps. The Washington events seem to have passed off pretty well, as far as I can tell. Clinton saw Adams, Hume, Trimble, McMichael and (at least at the White House reception) Alderdice. Berger told me Clinton had encouraged them all to seize this historic moment, both publicly and privately. Berger had found Adams more convincing than in the past about his willingness not to walk away from whatever was agreed. The hardest interlocutor had been Trimble. Berger was not convinced he had "crossed the Rubicon" of accepting the overriding need for a settlement now, at least in his mind, though he said he had (probably a shrewd assessment). Overall Berger thought the fact of them all being in Washington together, and feted as actors in a major political drama, might have helped things move forward, though he accepted that this might also wear off quite quickly. Clinton himself was very focussed and ready to do anything we wanted which could be helpful, despite his forthcoming long trip to Africa.

On the timetable there are three negotiating weeks to Easter. No-one doubts that if agreement is to be reached, you and the Taoiseach will have to be heavily involved. The slots for your involvement on an intensive basis over a number of days are not easy to identify – possibly 28-30 March, or after ASEM (2-4 April) has finished, though the PES conclave on 7 April is also a fixed point. You

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might need to spend 2/3 days in Northern Ireland – and I fear it might even ruin your Easter holiday.

On the substance, the difficulties are obvious. Despite all the months of talking, not one word of text is yet banked, and there is a huge distance to go. Our immediate objective must be to sort out the North-South points, where the gap remains wide, but we must move on other fronts in parallel too.

The game-plan for the next few days is as follows:

- (i) to give Teahon three chapters of our draft text, on North-South, East-West (Council of the Isles), and the new British/Irish bilateral agreement, in exchange for the whole Irish draft paper. The latest drafts are attached. They take into account some of Trimble's latest comments, but by no means all. I would not propose to send him these sections again at this stage but to wait for Irish reactions first.
- (ii) To float with Trimble the Strand 1 chapter of our text – latest draft attached. He will not like quite a lot of it, notably the ideas of anything other than simple majority voting in the Assembly, and of collective government arrangements. But there is no point in kidding him that his current position is likely to run.
- (iii) In parallel, to put on the table in the Belfast talks a series of very short "key issues" papers, designed to identify the main problems and point towards solutions, without being too prescriptive. A couple of draft samples are attached.

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This is a difficult exercise, in which the Unionists could explode at any moment, but the talks themselves have to have something to bite on.

The overall aim is to get a single draft negotiating text on the table as soon as possible, preferably floated by Mitchell. Realistically we have to have got to this position, or be very close to it, by the week beginning 30 March.

The key contacts for you in the next few days, once they are back from Washington, are Ahern and Trimble. You need to talk to Ahern about our texts once he has had a chance to look at them, eg on Friday afternoon, when you are back from Bonn; and to Trimble about where we stand generally, and about Strand 1 in particular. NB Trimble's Executive Council is on Saturday 21 March – he should be easier to deal with after that.

Other issues to keep in mind:

- Maze prison/Narey report (see separate piece in box)
- Prisoners paper: when to float in the talks
- Constitutional issues: we propose to float with the Irish some language for change of our legislation (I have texts if you want to see them).
- You should see Mitchell at some point, but not yet.

JOHN HOLMES

