

From: THE PRIVATE SECRETARY



NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE
11 MILLBANK
LONDON
SW1P 4QE

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JPo
AC*

John Holmes Esq
Private Secretary to the Prime Minister
No. 10 Downing Street
London SW1A 2AA

30 March 1998

Dear John,

CO-ORDINATING GROUP ON A POLITICAL SETTLEMENT: FIFTH MEETING

The Co-ordinating Group met on Thursday.

Senator Mitchell's intervention to bring the negotiations to a swift conclusion is helpful, and should help to generate a sense of momentum in the public mind. We will be encouraging him to hold press briefings each evening after the talks in order to keep this going.

A poll conducted for the NI Information Service this week shows a mixed picture. There is strong support for those parties at the talks; but a big divide between Unionists and Nationalists as to how they intend to vote in the referendum (70% of Nationalists say they will vote 'yes', with 61% of Unionists undecided). We will continue to tailor our messages accordingly. We have some useful opportunities coming up, including a speech by my Secretary of State to a Women's Conference next week.

On the key issues which bear on an agreement, the main points were as follows:

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- **Referendum:** the draft Order will be sent to parties next week; we need to resolve, with the Cabinet Office, propriety issues as a matter of urgency;
- **elections:** a number of policy issues need to be resolved with the parties, in particular, the electoral system;
- **police reform:** we have prepared a more detailed paper on the Commission which could be played into the talks next week;
- **prisons:** the Narey report will be made public next week;
- **decommissioning:** the issue has dominated the talks this week, and parties will return to it on Monday at the resumed (time-limited) plenary; the Commission is seeking authorised contacts to be nominated with paramilitary groups - this would be a positive development, but may not be achieved by Monday (Adams is resisting it);
- **rights:** we are continuing to refine our proposals on a Commission; identifying rights in addition to the ECHR remains difficult (a fallback option would be to remit the issue to the Commission once established);
- **equality:** proposals on flags and emblems, and the Irish language are before Ministers;
- **parades:** the Commission have helpfully decided to delay until 23 April giving their preliminary view on a number of contentious parades; the decision on the Ormeau Road march scheduled for 13 April will be made by 3 April; the Lower Ormeau Resident's Group are in the process of seeking a judicial review of the Commission membership;
- **normalisation:** the sub-committee on confidence building measures considered the Government's paper on security issues on Tuesday; the paper emphasised that the Government aspires to full normalisation, but that the rate of this is necessarily dependent on the assessment of the level of threat;



- **Bloody Sunday:** the Inquiry's planned visit to Londonderry on 3 April has attracted interest this week; internally, we are considering media handling when the Inquiry's work begins in earnest;
- **NIO post-settlement:** planning for various scenarios continues, constrained in some cases by lack of clarity about the precise terms of a settlement;
- **NI departments post-settlement:** work on accommodation, staffing and structures continues;
- **consolidating the agreement:** we have established a working group to generate ideas to respond to the offers of US assistance.

Yours ever
J. L. Lindsay

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PS/Secretary of State